



Medicine and the Body in Antiquity

BECOMING A WOMAN AND MOTHER IN GRECO-ROMAN EGYPT

WOMEN'S BODIES, SOCIETY AND DOMESTIC SPACE

Ada Nifosi



Becoming a Woman and Mother in Greco-Roman Egypt

How did Greco-Roman Egyptian society perceive women's bodies and how did it acknowledge women's reproductive functions? Detailing women's lives in Greco-Roman Egypt this monograph examines understudied aspects of women's lives such as their coming of age, social and religious taboos of menstruation and birth rituals. It investigates medical, legal and religious aspects of women's reproduction, using both historical and archaeological sources, and shows how the social status of women and new-born children changed from the Dynastic to the Greco-Roman period.

Through a comparative and interdisciplinary study of the historical sources, papyri, artefacts and archaeological evidence, *Becoming a Woman and Mother in Greco-Roman Egypt* shows how Greek, Roman, Jewish and Near Eastern cultures impacted on the social perception of female puberty, childbirth and menstruation in Greco-Roman Egypt from the 3rd century BC to the 3rd century AD.

Ada Nifosi gained a BA in Classical Archaeology at the University of Padua, Italy, and an MA and MPhil in Egyptian Archaeology at the University of Bologna, Italy. She was awarded her PhD at the University of Kent, UK, where she is now a Lecturer in Ancient History.

Medicine and the Body in Antiquity

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Domestic Space

Ada Nifosi

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**To my father Michele, my aunt Paola and Alberto,
always with me**



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***Important note:** for Figures 1.1, 2.1, 3.3, 3.5, 3.7, 3.9, 3.10, 3.17, 3.26, 3.30, 3.34, 3.35, 3.34 and 3.35, credits are listed as requested by the copyright holders. Measurements, where known, can be found in this list, but please check the captions to see the author’s dates and definitions.

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Abbreviations

- AN:** Ashmolean Museum inventory number
- Bakchias I:** S. Pernigotti and M. Capasso 1994, *Bakchias I: Rapporto preliminare della campagna di scavo del 1993*. Pisa: Giardini
- Bakchias II:** S. Pernigotti and M. Capasso 1995, *Bakchias II: Rapporto preliminare della campagna di scavo del 1994*. Pisa: Giardini
- Bakchias III:** S. Pernigotti and M. Capasso 1996, *Bakchias III: Rapporto preliminare della campagna di scavo del 1995*. Pisa: Giardini
- BM:** British Museum inventory number
- Brooklyn:** Brooklyn Museum inventory number
- Cambridge E:** Fitzwilliam Museum inventory number
- CBd:** Campbell Bonner Magical Gem Database: <http://www2.szepmuveszeti.hu/talismans2/>
- CDD:** The Chicago Demotic Dictionary <https://oi.uchicago.edu/research/publications/demotic-dictionary-oriental-institute-university-chicago>
- E:** Louvre Museum inventory number
- EC:** Egyptian Centre Canolfan Eiftaidd (Swansea) inventory number
- Esna V:** S. Sauneron 1962, *Les fêtes religieuses d'Esna aux derniers siècles du paganisme*. Cairo: IFAO.
- FCD:** R. O. Faulkner 1962 (reprinted 1972, 1976), *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*. Oxford: Griffith institute
- FIP:** First Intermediate Period (2184–2040 BC.)
- FR:** Freer Sackler Museum inventory number
- Gly:** M. Fjeldhagen 1995, *Catalogue of Greco-Roman Terracottas from Egypt: Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*. Copenhagen: Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek
- IFAO:** Institut français d'archéologie orientale
- JE:** Cairo Museum inventory number
- KM:** Kelsey Museum inventory number

- LÄ:** W. O. E. Helck, W. Westendorf, R. Drenkhahn and C. Meyer 1975–92, *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Vols 1–7. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz
- Lesko, Dictionary 2:** L. H. Lesko and B. S. Lesko 2004 (eds), *A Dictionary of Late Egyptian*, Vols 1–5, 2nd edition. Providence, RI: B.C. Scribe Publications
- LSAM:** F. Sokolowski 1951, *Lois sacrées de l'Asie mineure*. Paris: E. de Boccard
- LSJ:** Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie 1996: xvi–xviii. Online database updated in February 2011: <http://www.tlg.uci.edu/ljs/about.php>
- LSS:** F. Sokolowski 1969, *Lois sacrées des cités grecques*. Paris: E. de Boccard
- MAH:** Museum of Art and History of Geneva inventory number
- Manchester:** Manchester Museum inventory number
- MedWb:** H. Deines and W. Westendorf 1961–1962, *Wörterbuch der medizinischen Texte, Grundriß der Medizin der alten Ägypter* VII, 1–2. Berlin: Akademie Verlag
- MEL:** Cherbourg-Octeville Natural History Museum inventory number
- MK:** Middle Kingdom (2030–1650 BC)
- M:** LACMA Museum inventory number
- MM:** The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York inventory number
- NK:** New Kingdom (1550–1070 BC)
- OK:** Old Kingdom (2649–2130 BC)
- OIM:** Oriental Institute Museum of Chicago inventory number
- OGIS:** W. Dittenberger 1905, *Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae: Supplementum Sylloges Inscriptionum Graecarum*, Vols 1–2. Leipzig: S. Hirzel
- OLD:** P. G. W. Glare (ed.) 1982 (first edition 1968), *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Ptol. Lexikon:** P. Wilson 1997, *A Ptolemaic Lexikon: A Lexicographical Study of the Texts in the Temple of Edfu*, OLA 78. Leuven: Peeters
- R:** J. Rowlandson 1998, *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt: A Sourcebook*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- SIP:** Second Intermediate Period (1782–1570 BC)
- Tebtynis I:** C. Gallazzi and G. Hadji-Minaglou 2000, *Tebtynis*: 1. Cairo: IFAO
- Tebtynis IV:** Gallazzi and G. Hadji-Minaglou 2007, *Tebtynis*: 4. Cairo: IFAO
- TIP:** Third Intermediate Period (1070–712 BC)

- UC:** Petrie Museum inventory number
VA (followed by the *ostrakon* number): Deir el-Medina
ostraka in Vandier D’Abbadie 1936–1937–1946–1959
 (see bibliography)
WAM: The Walters Art Museum inventory number
Wb.: A. Erman and H. Grapow 1950, *Wörterbuch der
 ägyptischen Sprache*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag

* The main periods of Dynastic Egypt studied in this book will be abbreviated in **OK, FIP, MK, SIP, NK, TIP**.

My definitions of ancient Egyptian words are taken from the online database of the *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache* (**Wb**) while the *Chicago Demotic Dictionary* (**CDD**) provided definitions for the Demotic terms. Demotic transliterations follow the conventions chosen by the translators. For Greek papyri, I use the abbreviations, editions, transcriptions and translations as listed on *papyri.info* and *Trismegistos.org*. Whenever I use a different edition, I will specify the name of the editor or the translator in the endnote. The editions of Hieratic sources will be referenced in the text.

Greek authors and their works are referenced using the abbreviations according to the 9th edition of Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie’s *Greek-English Lexicon* (**LSJ**). Latin authors and their works are referenced using the abbreviations found in the Oxford Latin Dictionary (**OLD**). Whenever I use a different edition, I will specify the name of the editor or the translator in the endnote.

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All the museum artefacts will be referenced with the museum abbreviation followed by the museum’s inventory number (e.g. **BM** 1001 for an object at the British Museum). All the ostraca from Deir el Medina included in the catalogue by Vandier D’Abbadie will be referenced with **VA** followed by the ostrakon number.

Introduction

The present book is a study on women in Greco-Roman Egypt and, in particular, is aimed at investigating the social and legal status of women through the lens of women's reproduction. This book will focus in particular on three phases of a woman's reproductive cycle: coming of age at puberty, menstruation and childbirth. These aspects of women's lives have never been studied using a multidisciplinary approach. Such an approach will bring together, for the first time, historical sources, papyri and archaeological evidence in order to re-examine previous scholarly assumptions on this topic, and to raise new questions for future researchers. Previously, authors on women in Greco-Roman Egypt had a main focus either on papyrology or the archaeological evidence; my own work uses these two kinds of sources together, with illuminating results. The title of the book evokes the transformation of girls into women and of women into mothers through these three fundamental transitional phases. The main stage for all these phases is the domestic space, the final element of the title. I will show that in Roman Oxyrhynchus of the rituals of coming of age for girls was a banquet organised in the house by the girls' father. Rooms of the house and domestic pavilions were also the places where women gave birth, and performed their postpartum ablutions.

This topic builds on the work in Rowlandson's *Women and Society in Greco-Roman Egypt*,¹ Montserrat's *Sex and Society in Greco-Roman Egypt*,² and Husson's *Oikia*.³ These three books provided not only a translation and a commentary for many relevant sources, but also gave me a solid methodological frame.

Rowlandson's sourcebook contains many Greek papyri and a limited number of Demotic sources about women. She translates them into English, divides them by topic and presents them chronologically, so it is easier for the reader to appreciate how social change affected the different spheres of women's lives (marriage, death, religion, etc.). She also provides the occasional, insightful comparison with previous Dynastic traditions, in matters of law, religion and social habits.

Montserrat, on the other hand, selected a group of relevant sources and case studies in order to explain the social construction of women's sexuality in Greco-Roman Egypt. This book is the one I am indebted to the most from a methodological point of view, because it provides my research with a stimulating approach to

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the study of ancient women's bodies in the ancient world. Montserrat explained that societies appropriated the human body, making something that once was 'natural', 'cultural'. Greco-Roman Egyptian society gave the body's behaviours a set of names and rules, and transformed the phases of biological development, like birth and puberty, into rites of social incorporation. The result was a socio-cultural construction of the human body which was called by Montserrat the 'social body'.⁴ A woman's 'social body' is a mirror of society, reflecting its values, beliefs and taboos. Montserrat also posed some questions about rites of passage and taboos; in particular he focused on the Roman Period Egyptian rituals for the coming of age. He also discussed the possibility that women were confined during menstruation and childbirth. However, there are gaps in his research which my study will fill by re-examining the sources with the support of more historical and archaeological evidence.

The final important source for my work is *Oikia*, by Husson. This book is an accurate 'dictionary' of all the terms relating to buildings or areas of the house as mentioned in Greek papyri dating to the Hellenistic and Roman Period. Husson's work is fundamental because it provides a systematic list of sources from which I began my analysis of domestic contexts. Once again, as with Rowlandson's contribution, the limitation of this work is the absence of Demotic sources. As such, in my description of domestic spaces in Chapter 6, I will try to relate some of Husson's Greek terms to the Demotic terms found in papyri.

My study is focused on Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, from the 3rd century BC to the 4th century AD.⁵ This is the main chronological span, but I shall make several comparisons with Dynastic Egypt, in order to clarify the origins of many cultural aspects of Greco-Roman Egyptian society. Including Dynastic Egypt in a study about Greco-Roman Egypt is a novel and important approach, because these two periods have rarely been compared. The everyday life of Dynastic Egyptian women has been studied by many scholars,⁶ and these works provided me with useful comparative evidence for this study on Egyptian women in the Greco-Roman era. Dynastic Egypt is also an essential comparison in order to understand some elements of Greco-Roman Egyptian religious iconography: for instance, Chapter 3 will show how many of the votive female figurines produced in Greco-Roman Egypt originated from types already produced in the Dynastic Period.

This book also benefited from another novel approach: a comparison between Greco-Roman Egyptian and Near Eastern common traditions, derived from an ongoing mutual exchange of cultural motifs and values. This comparison was particularly fruitful in the study of the pollution of childbirth and menstruation in Chapter 5.

Another original aspect of this book is the joint use of papyri and archaeological sources. I will discuss in greater depth the use of the archaeological sources in the introduction to Chapter 6.

Finally, any study of social behaviours and beliefs would be incomplete without a philological approach to the relevant sources: this book is based on sources in different languages, in particular Old, Middle and Late Egyptian for Dynastic Egypt, and Greek, Demotic and Coptic for Greco-Roman Egypt.⁷

Overview of the chapters

The chapters of this book are aimed at answering a complex question: how did Greco-Roman Egyptian society perceive women's bodies, and how did it acknowledge women's core biological functions?

The first chapter will explain the social and legal status of women. The social status of women is presented according to their life-cycle, in order to show how women's status changed according to their age.⁸ This part of the book is based on the sources on women provided by Rowlandson, but also on the remarkable collection of women's letters by Bagnall and Cribiore.⁹ It is also based on demographic studies for the Hellenistic¹⁰ and Roman periods.¹¹ These give us important information, for instance, the role of women in the household, their occupation, marital status and their free or enslaved condition. This chapter is mainly a *status quaestionis*, showing arguments which are supported by most scholars.¹² However, I will pay special section to women's coming of age, based on the sources available from Greco-Roman Egypt, in comparison with the Greek and the Roman evidence from elsewhere. I will also present, as a case-study, a ritual of coming of age which is attested in a group of late Roman papyri from Oxyrhynchos. This case-study has already been analysed by Montserrat¹³ and Huebner,¹⁴ but it will be discussed again here, with the support of additional sources.

The second part of the first chapter concerns women's legal status: the legal documents presented here are marriage contracts and documents concerning women's management of property, and their right to inherit property. Any issues concerning women's 'right to rule' in the Ptolemaic Period will be omitted from this section, because this book is mainly focused on the lives of non-royal women.

In the second chapter, I will focus on birth rituals and on the evolution of midwifery from Dynastic through into Greco-Roman Egypt, with comparisons from the ancient Near East. I chose to give more focus to the ritual aspects of midwifery because I think that the medical aspects have already been thoroughly studied by several scholars.¹⁵

The main Dynastic medical sources are Egyptian medical papyri and medical spells. These papyri contain diagnoses and prescriptions on gynaecology and obstetrics.¹⁶ The most studied Greco-Roman medical sources on midwifery are the Hippocratic treatises,¹⁷ a collection of medical treatises written in the Classical and Hellenistic eras by different Greek authors which were probably widely utilised in Alexandria and in other Greek *poleis* in Egypt; for instance, Herophilus¹⁸ operated in Alexandria in the 4th century BC¹⁹ and wrote a lost treatise on midwifery. Lloyd's study²⁰ shows how Hippocratic medicine paralleled traditional Egyptian medicine introducing a more 'scientific' medical practice. Lloyd also argued that women's status changed from the Greco-Roman Period, and this transformation influenced medical practices and attitudes towards female patients. The tradition of Hippocratic treatises inspired medical practitioners of the Roman Empire such as Soranus of Ephesus²¹ and Galen of Pergamon,²² two Roman-era medical writers who gave particular attention to midwifery and gynaecology.

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The Hippocratic treatises did not replace Egyptian medicine in the Greco-Roman Period, however. Private Greek letters show that midwifery was still practised among Egyptian families as in the past, and they also show that the priestly medical heritage was still strong. Traditionally in Egypt, the midwife was not only a medical practitioner but also acted as a performer of magical rituals which aided childbirth.²³ Spells for accelerating birth survive from the Middle Kingdom (2030–1650 BC) (MK)²⁴ and much later Demotic spells exist for the protection of space.²⁵ This chapter will bring together the evidence from the Dynastic and Greco-Roman periods, in order to show the evolution of midwifery in Egypt throughout this very long era. It will also discuss a group of Greek and Demotic gynaecological papyri found in Roman temples, as evidence for continued priestly interest in midwifery.

The third chapter will expand on the topic of birth rituals, dealing more generally with domestic cults related to fertility and childbirth. Domestic cults are attested by artefacts like amulets, vases for libations and terracottas placed in wall niches and altars. In the past four decades, various studies²⁶ have investigated ritual practices, artefacts and domestic cultic installations in Dynastic Egypt. Household religion in the Greco-Roman world has been studied by Bodet and Olyan,²⁷ and many artefacts pertaining to domestic fertility cults in Greco-Roman Egypt were studied by Dasen.²⁸ On the same topic, another important study was carried out by Aubert.²⁹

The third chapter will be divided into three main sections: the first will concern the spells for the protection of domestic space; the second section will be a typological study of cultic images of childbearing women; and the third will show the evolution of the cult of the god of childbirth, Bes.

My survey of votive images of naked and childbearing women from the Dynastic to the Greco-Roman Egypt will show how women's bodies are represented on figurines and cultic images in order to promote fertility, protection and healing. This section will bring together Dynastic and Greco-Roman artefacts, and will partly question the traditional classification of Dynastic figurines and Greco-Roman terracottas. However, my aim is not to provide new, alternative classifications, but rather to produce a detailed and coherent survey of materials which are highly relevant to the topic at hand.

The third section of the chapter is dedicated to the enduring cult of the god Bes. This started as a domestic cult for the protection of women in childbirth, and was later appropriated by kings and priests because of its immense popularity.

In the fourth chapter, I will discuss ancient Egyptian ideas about the unborn child, in order to understand at which stage of pregnancy the foetus was considered a fully formed child. Here, I will discuss the positions of philosophers and medical writers, but I will also look into the perception of common people, and how they considered foetuses and newborn children. I will do this by, for example, analysing some burials of stillborn and newborn children (younger than one year), in order to find out whether they received a different burial from those of older children and adults. Finally, I will show how ancient ideas about the status of the unborn and newborn child shaped the Greco-Roman Egyptian legal

system, with considerable differences apparent between the Egyptian, Greek and Roman legal systems.

In the fifth chapter I will talk about ideas of pollution, and taboos caused by women's reproductive cycles. Pollution in ancient and modern societies is a very complex concept which has been studied by anthropologists,³⁰ an approach pioneered by Mary Douglas.³¹ This chapter will not contribute to the anthropological debate on pollution, but will try instead to understand which ideas of pollution circulated in Greco-Roman Egypt, and how these ideas had a real or supposed impact on people's private and public behaviour. A recent book on pollution and purification in the ancient world³² has collected together various essays on ideas of pollution according to the Greek, Roman, Near Eastern and Egyptian cultures. This work is a valuable contribution because it brings together, for the first time, the ideas of scholars who are studying the same topic within different cultures. Chapter 5 will be based on a similarly comparative approach, analysing sources for pollution from both Dynastic and Greco-Roman Egypt, from the Greek world, from Jewish texts and from ancient Near Eastern cultures. All these influences are important components of the multicultural society that was Greco-Roman Egypt. Even this largely inclusive reconstruction is already a simplification, though, because other ethnic minorities might also have contributed to the forming of ideas around pollution in Egypt.

The chapter will also attempt to explain why Greco-Roman Egyptian society attributed ideas of pollution to women's reproduction, and what the consequences of this were. Ideas around bodily pollution during menstruation and childbirth had a long-lasting impact on women's access to sacred areas, and might have created particular patterns in their use of domestic spaces. For instance, Egyptologists have discussed the possibility that menstruating women in Dynastic Egypt were isolated in a special room, or in a communal area outside the house.³³

In Chapter 6, I will show how these common ideas of pollution caused by menstruation and childbirth might have influenced women's use of domestic spaces in Greco-Roman Egypt. It is important to look at the way women used (or were allowed to use) domestic space because this reflects their general position in society. I will discuss whether there was an internal gendered division of domestic space in Greco-Roman Egyptian houses, or whether women occupied the same rooms as men. In the following two sections of the chapter, I will use archaeological evidence and information from papyri to investigate which areas of the house were used by women during menstruation, childbirth and postpartum confinement. The aim of these sections is not to make definitive statements about the internal organisation of the home, but rather to present new original theories as to women's use of such spaces in Greco-Roman Egypt, by bringing together, for the first time, many relevant archaeological and written sources.

Ethnicity, gender and class

Before we continue it is important to ask what we mean by 'women in Greco-Roman Egypt'. How can we collect and analyse reliable information about

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women's private and public lives? The most traditional way of classifying people within a particular society is by gender, ethnicity and class,³⁴ and by using these categories it is possible to observe and classify family roles, professions and even behaviours.

As far as gender is concerned, my study will be gender-specific,³⁵ being focused on women's status in society. Dealing with Montserrat's 'social body' of women means finding a perfect point of correspondence between the ideas of sex and gender: on one side the biological functions of women are discussed in relation to their biomedical aspects (e.g. the nature of menstruation, phases of childbirth etc.). On the other side, it is acknowledged that both women's perception of their own bodies and any external medical, religious or ritual intervention are the result of a cultural construct. Putting women and women's bodies in the context of society means that in no part of this study will they be dichotomically divided from men. Isolating women as a separate category would mean ignoring the fact that women often have more in common with men than with other women when it comes to class, wealth, level of education and ethnicity.

As far as class is concerned, I will largely be dealing with non-élite women, but the classes involved will vary according to the historical period and the focus of each chapter: the documents in the Ptolemaic Period concern all women aside from those in the royal household, whereas in the Roman Period all classes of women are mentioned.

The hardest challenge when discussing women in Greco-Roman Egypt is classifying their ethnicity: the ethnic identity of women, and people in general, is very difficult to define in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt.

Egypt had been inhabited by communities of Greeks, Jews, Carians and many other ethnic groups since the Late Dynastic Period (664–332 BC). However, it was only after the conquest of Alexander the Great, when Greeks became the rulers of Egypt, that Greek culture and language became predominant over the others. Egypt was occupied by different groups of soldiers arriving between the 4th century BC and the mid-3rd century BC;³⁶ by the 3rd century BC, the Greeks were 5% of the population in Egypt, estimated to be around 4 million people in total.³⁷ These occupant groups were mainly composed of male veterans initially,³⁸ but then were likely later joined by women and families.³⁹ Most of these soldiers and their women came from Greek areas of the Eastern Mediterranean. However, by the time of Ptolemy I, many people arrived from Magna Graecia and from areas of the Near East, like Asia Minor and Syria. Ptolemy I might have deported 100,000 Jewish prisoners to Egypt, including many women.⁴⁰ Yet before 280 BC, there are no papyrological or epigraphic documents that contain ethnic terms, while after this foreigners can be ethnically identified in Greek documents (as well as in a smaller number of Demotic documents), mainly coming from Middle and Upper Egypt and the Fayyum.⁴¹

The analysis of ethnic terms is difficult and controversial. First of all, as La'da observed, ethnic terms need to be divided between real and fictitious ones. Fictitious ethnic terms should not be interpreted literally because they were assigned to people in official documents to express their occupation, their familial

position or their legal position.⁴² One hundred and seventy-eight different ethnic terms have been found in Greek documents (in reference to specific persons) with only nine in Demotic documents. In the case of women, the earliest genuine ethnic designation is dated to 310 BC, and the latest to the 1st century BC.⁴³ Real ethnic designations for immigrant women in Greek documents come to twenty-six in total; they are ‘attested 57 times in reference to 48 individuals’,⁴⁴ while there are no certain genuine ethnic designations for women found in Demotic documents. Ethnic designations for foreign women are considerably fewer than those for men in official Greek documents. This indicates that there were probably fewer foreign women coming to Egypt, although La’da warns that the small number of foreign women in Greek documents could also mirror their marginal participation in official legal acts.⁴⁵

Foreign women who migrated to Egypt, apart from Jewish women who followed Jewish law, could choose between Greek and the Egyptian law, with the latter certainly more convenient and advantageous for them.⁴⁶ Therefore, many foreign women might have soon assumed an Egyptian identity in order to be bound by Egyptian legal acts in Demotic;⁴⁷ this might also explain the almost complete absence of foreign ethnic designations in Demotic documents. In Greek documents, more than half of the genuine ethnic terms that appear indicate women from Greece, Macedonia and Cyrene. Other terms attest the presence of Syrians, Arabs and Jews.⁴⁸

When considering the attestation of real ethnic designations of foreigners in documents, we must consider what happened when these groups arrived in Egypt. The peak of real ethnic attestations for women is dated to around 230–20 BC; after this period the attestations are less frequent. As La’da has argued, this could be due to a decrease of foreign immigration, but also to an increase in intermarriages between foreign people and the local population.⁴⁹ Indeed, the Ptolemies never imposed upon the Greeks and other foreigners’ any form of segregation between them and the native Egyptians. Many Greeks married Egyptian women, but also many Egyptians learned the Greek language and incorporated aspects of Greek culture into their own, becoming more Hellenised in the process. Egyptian men and women adopted Greek names,⁵⁰ and many women had double names.⁵¹

Therefore, after a century of intermarriage, an ethnic term like ‘Greek man’ was no longer a trustworthy indicator of the Greek ethnic group. The same ambiguity can be found in ethnic terms given to women: Demotic documents with the terms *šhm.t Wynn* and *t3 Wynn*, both meaning ‘Greek woman’, probably indicate a familial position rather than an ethnic appurtenance. In reality, they could well be wives or daughters of Hellenised Egyptians or Jews who held the status of Greeks.⁵² For the same reason, the ethnic distinction between Greeks and Egyptians was no longer possible in the late Ptolemaic Period, but the categories of *Hellenes* (Greeks) and *Aigyptioi* (native Egyptians)⁵³ were still used for tax purposes.⁵⁴ *Hellenes* were a group of people with a Greek ‘legal status’, who differed from the *Aigyptioi* because they were exempted from the universal tax of one obol per year. However, the ‘Greeks’ also included those Egyptians, Jews

and other populations in Egypt, who acquired such a status by learning Greek and working in the Ptolemaic administration.

This complex picture shows that the Ptolemies had no interest in maintaining a social and legal distinction between Egyptians and Greeks: mixed marriages were allowed and Egyptians were no less privileged than the Greeks from a legal point of view. However, the early Ptolemaic legal status of Greeks and Egyptians is difficult to compare because Greek and Egyptian courts were divided. In the early Ptolemaic Period, Egyptians could appeal to their native judges, the *laokritai* (the judges of the *laoi*), while Greeks could appeal to Greek judges, the *chrematistai*, even though most criminal justice, both for Greeks and Egyptians, was concentrated in the hands of the *chrematistai*.⁵⁵ The Amnesty Decree by Ptolemy VIII Euergetes, Cleopatra II and Cleopatra III in 118 BC, tried to reform the legal system, in order to defend the areas of competence of the *laokritai* in Egyptian law, areas often usurped by the *chrematistai*. According to the 118 BC decree,⁵⁶ legal disputes regarding only Egyptians should pertain to the *laokritai*; disputes between Greeks, to the *chrematistai*. The situation was more controversial when the dispute was between Egyptians and Greeks. In this case, the judges were appointed according to the language of the contract: if the contract was in Demotic, the *laokritai* were appointed, if it was in Greek, the *chrematistai*. This decree probably never really made any difference to the real situation: the *chrematistai* decided most of the cases, and by the 1st century BC the *laokritai* disappeared.⁵⁷ In addition, by the 1st century BC, Demotic documents gradually decreased in number;⁵⁸ it is likely that, in the late Ptolemaic Period, the crumbling administration could not maintain a bilingual Greek-Demotic bureaucratic system.

Since the 2nd century BC, Demotic documents needed to include an ‘elaborate Greek subscription, to which sometimes an extra Greek summary was added in the register office’.⁵⁹ As a consequence, by the early Roman Period many people decided to write the official documents directly in Greek, even if official Demotic documents survived for a long time.⁶⁰ The decline of Demotic official documents did not mean that Egyptian law totally disappeared in the 2nd century AD, though. By this time, Greek language and legal formulae were the only ones surviving, but since the early Ptolemaic Period, Greek contracts had been considerably influenced by Egyptian law.⁶¹

From the Ptolemaic to the Roman Period, society changed in terms of social mobility. In the Ptolemaic Period, mixed marriages with a consequent Hellenisation of native Egyptians, shows that the population enjoyed significant social mobility at all levels. The division into classes was more dictated by wealth rather than by ethnic privileges. Women enjoyed the advantages of social mobility in the Ptolemaic Period; in particular Egyptian women could improve their social position by marrying a rich Greek or a Hellenised Egyptian. In addition, Egyptian women could follow Egyptian law and act without a guardian,⁶² at least until the decrease in the use of Demotic contracts in the 1st century AD. From that time, all adult women in Egypt had to follow Greek law and their affairs now had to be supervised by a male guardian (*kyrios*).

This situation changed significantly in the Roman Period when society was divided into new rigid ‘ethnic’ groups. However, the Greco-Egyptian population was so intermixed by the 1st century AD that the Romans had to create, for legal purposes, fictitious ethnic groups, whose division was not based primarily on ethnicity at all.⁶³ The highest class of citizens were Roman citizens, who were a very small group in Egypt until the 3rd century AD. Below them, new privileged groups were distinguished from less privileged ones, according to their ‘ethnic origin’ and geographic provenance. The highest class after Roman citizens were the citizens of Greek cities, called *astoi* or *cives peregrini*. These cities were Alexandria, Ptolemais, Antinoupolis (from the reign of Hadrian) and Naucratis, but the citizens from Alexandria were the most privileged. Non-citizens lived in other cities and in the countryside, and were all called *Aigyptioi* or *peregrini Aegyptii* by the Romans, even if they included both Greek-speaking and Egyptian-speaking people.⁶⁴ The *Aigyptioi* category included the inhabitants of nome capitals, who were variously called *Hellenes* or *metropolitai*.⁶⁵ Within the *metropolitai* there was a privileged hereditary group called ‘those from the gymnasium’. In addition to the *metropolitai*, there was another hereditary group among the *Aigyptioi* who had similar privileges to the elite of the *metropolitai*:⁶⁶ the group of ‘6475 Greek men in Arsinoite’.

In the early Roman Period, Egyptian women could become *metropolitai* or acquire the title of a privileged group through intermarriage. For instance, they could marry gymnasiarchs and men from the group of ‘6475 Greek men in Arsinoite’. However, women could not adopt these privileged statuses directly: they could only acquire them from their husbands and pass them onto their sons.⁶⁷

From 50 to 73 AD the Romans forbade intermarriage between the two most privileged categories of citizens (Roman citizens and Greek citizens) and the *Aigyptioi*, and restricted access to the privileged orders of the gymnasiarchs and *metropolitai* by discouraging mixed marriages between these privileged groups and other *Aigyptioi*.⁶⁸

More broadly, in Roman law,⁶⁹ adult women of all classes and ages were affected by *levitas animi* and *infirmitas animi/consilii*,⁷⁰ which means that they were never considered able to adequately decide legal and economic matters for themselves, so had to appoint a further guardian for any legal act (*tutor mulieris*).⁷¹ However, the Greek system of guardianship in Egypt was not quickly nor fully replaced by the Roman one until the Edict of Caracalla in 212 AD.⁷² Indeed, another Roman law that appeared in the 2nd century AD, but was only widely enacted in Egypt after the Edict, was the *ius trium liberorum*.⁷³ According to this law, women with three or more children were granted the right to legally act without a guardian.⁷⁴

Notes

- 1 Rowlandson 1998. The sources from Rowlandson 1998 will be indicated in the book with the same abbreviation as that used in the sourcebook: a letter ‘R’ followed by the number of the document. When considered relevant, additional information on the document is provided.

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- 2 Montserrat 1996.
- 3 Husson 1983.
- 4 Montserrat 1996: 27ff., in particular 29–30.
- 5 I will still consider the 4th century AD as the ‘Roman Period’ even though I am aware that it is also variously named the ‘Byzantine Period’, ‘Christian Period’ and ‘Coptic Period’. Cf. discussion in Keenan, Manning and Yiftach-Firanko 2014: xxii.
- 6 Manniche 1987; Janssen and Janssen 1996; Watterson 1991; Robins 1993; Tyldesley 1994; Capel and Markoe 1996; Leospo and Tosi 1997; Toivari-Viitala 2001; Graves-Brown 2010. Most of these books include at least a chapter about aspects of reproduction, like childbirth and confinement.
- 7 See Abbreviations for further details about the editions.
- 8 Approach modelled on Rowlandson 1998.
- 9 Bagnall and Cribiore 2008.
- 10 Clarysse and Thompson 2009a and 2009b.
- 11 Parkin 1992; Bagnall and Frier 2006; Scheidel 2001; Holleran and Pudsey 2011.
- 12 Studies on childhood: Harlow and Laurence 2008; Grubbs and Parkin 2013. Studies on family: Alston 2005; Rawson 2011. Education: Cribiore 2001b.
- 13 Montserrat 1990, 1991, 1996.
- 14 Huebner 2009.
- 15 Midwifery in the Ptolemaic period: Lang 2012. Midwifery in the Roman era: Hirt-Raj 2006. Also on midwives in the Greco-Roman world see Retief 2010: 166–188.
- 16 Papyri containing diagnoses and prescriptions on gynaecology and obstetrics are available in modern editions such as: Grapow 1958; Ghalioungui 1963; Nunn 2002.
- 17 Lloyd 1978.
- 18 von Staden 1989.
- 19 Aubert 1989: 423, n. 4.
- 20 Lloyd 1983. The Hippocratic view of women’s body is also nicely analysed in King’s *Hippocrates’ Women* (King 1998). Other important studies on Hippocratic treatises are contributions by Dean-Jones (1989 and 2001) and Hanson (1994 and 2008).
- 21 Temkin 1991.
- 22 Kühn 1821–1833.
- 23 For previous studies about maternity and birth rituals in Dynastic Egypt see Marshall 2015, Töpfer 2014 and Guerneur 2016.
- 24 Borghouts 1971: 30.
- 25 Westendorf 1999: 424.
- 26 Kemp 1979; Ikram 1989; Meskell 1998; Koltsida 2006 and 2007; Kleinke 2007; Stevens 2009; Kemp and Stevens 2010.
- 27 Bodel and Olyan 2008.
- 28 Dasen 2008a, 2008b, 2009.
- 29 Aubert 1989.
- 30 Saucier 1972: 238–248; Webster 1973.
- 31 Douglas 1966.
- 32 Frevel and Nihan 2013.
- 33 See *infra*: Montserrat 1996: 47–48; Colin 2001: 259–268; Wilfong 1999: 419–434; Wilfong 2002: 47–53; 76–79; Frandsen 2007: 81–106.
- 34 Bagnall and Cribiore 2008: 8.
- 35 I will not delve into the theoretical discussion about gender because this has already been done very well by Toivari-Viitala (2001) and Meskell (1997: 597–602), who have thoroughly discussed all the possible issues surrounding the meaning of gender, and the possible implications of ‘engendering’ ancient Egyptian history. In 2011, Sweeney made a survey, for the UCLA Encyclopaedia, of all the arguments made by Egyptologists about sex and gender: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/3rv0t4np>. See also Frantzen 1993: 445–471.

- 36 Fischer-Bovet 2011: 152.
- 37 Fischer-Bovet 2011: 151–152.
- 38 Rowlandson 1998: 163.
- 39 La'da 2002: 168.
- 40 *Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates*, thirteen mentioned and discussed by Mélèze-Modrzejewski 1991. However La'da (2002: 168) and Mélèze-Modrzejewski (1991: 65) argued that the number of Jews indicated by this source might be exaggerated.
- 41 La'da 2002: 176–177.
- 42 La'da 2002: 169. For instance, Vandorpe and Waebens (2010: 425) claim that some native soldiers from Upper Egypt who had fought for the Ptolemies received the title of 'Persians', even though they were not. Rowlandson 1998: xviii.
- 43 La'da 2002: 172.
- 44 La'da 2002: 171, 178.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 See Chapter 1.
- 47 La'da 2002: 182–183.
- 48 La'da 2002: 172–173.
- 49 Ibid.: 176.
- 50 This 'hellenising tendency' among Egyptian families can be observed on the Ptolemaic census, where men with a Greek name have an Egyptian patronymic and relatives with an Egyptian name. Clarysse and Thompson 2009a: 326 and table 8:3.
- 51 Pomeroy 1984: 124.
- 52 La'da 2002: 171.
- 53 Clarysse and Thompson 2009b: 138ff.
- 54 Clarysse and Thompson 2009a: 147. The term used in fiscal papyri was *Wynn* (in demotic) or Ἑλληνες (in Greek). Lang 2012: 233, n. 108.
- 55 Bevan 2014: 159–160.
- 56 P. Tebt. 15 = C.Ord.Ptol. 53: Kerkeosiris, 118 BC. Bagnall and Derow 2004: n. 54.
- 57 Mélèze-Modrzejewski 1966: 166; Mélèze-Modrzejewski 1975: 708 n. 2, mentions the last attestation of the *laokritai* in a Demotic *ostrakon* dated to 96 BC: P. TestiBotti 11, Pathyris, 96 BC.
- 58 See Lewis 1993: 276–281.
- 59 Vandorpe and Waebens 2010: 418. According to Muhs (2005: 95), the earliest attested Greek registration of a Demotic contract is explicitly mentioned in P. Paris gr. 65 = P. Sel. II 415 = UPZ I, 596–614. Thebes, 145 BC.
- 60 Vandorpe and Waebens 2010: 417. Demotic official documents decreased in the early Roman Period, and especially between 12 BC and AD 2/4, but they did not disappear completely until the 2nd century AD. In addition, it is important to note that different kinds of official Demotic documents disappeared at different times. Further, although official Demotic documents largely decreased in the Roman Period, Demotic was still commonly used for private documents and contracts concerning the duties of Egyptian priests. Tait 1994: 189–190.
- 61 Maehler 1989: 23–24. Rowlandson noticed that some documents show acts which could not have been allowed by traditional Greek law, such as a woman acting as a guardian for her child (R125); and women mutually consenting to a divorce (R127). These documents will be analysed in a later chapter.
- 62 Pestman 1961: 182–184. However, Pestman (1961: 151–152) also mentions a bilingual Greek-Demotic document (P. Mich V 253, Tebtynis, AD 30) where a man acts as a guardian for his mother in the Egyptian part: the guardian is called *ts shn* in Demotic. Cf. Vandorpe and Waebens 2010: 419, n. 21.
- 63 Cf. Bagnall 2006: 108.
- 64 Vandorpe and Waebens 2010: 416. Vandorpe 2012: 260–276. Rowlandson 2004: 152.
- 65 Since the 1st century AD, the status of the *metropolitai* within the *Aigyptioi* had always

been privileged compared to the rest of the inhabitants of the countryside. The status of *metropoleis* became more and more privileged, until they were officially given the status of Greek *poleis* by Septimius Severus in AD 200. Rowlandson 1998: 12.

- 66 See discussion in van Minnen 2002: 337–353 and Vandorpe and Waebens 2010: 423.
- 67 Rowlandson 1998: 12. Rowlandson (2004: 151–156) also suggests that women of the gymnasial order remained culturally more Egyptian than men. Cf. Vandorpe and Waebens 2010: 423.
- 68 The Roman *Lex Minicia* (Cherry 1990: 244–266) that forbade marriage between Romans and non-Romans is attested in Roman Egypt in the *Gnomon of the Idios Logos*. Vandorpe and Waebens 2010: 422–424. This document shows that there were some exceptions to this law in particular cases. For instance, the Gnomon declares that: ‘It has been granted to Roman men or *astoi* who by ignorance marry Egyptian women to be exempt from liability and for the children to follow the paternal status.’ Rowlandson 1998: 177, n. 46.
- 69 Gaius, *Inst.* I.144 in Poste 1904.
- 70 Bruun and Edmonson 2015: 587.
- 71 Arjava 1997: 25–30.
- 72 Keenan, Manning and Yiftach-Firanko 2014: 45.
- 73 *Ius trium liberorum*, introduced by the Augustan marriage laws: *lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* (18 BC) and reinforced by the *lex Papia Poppea* (AD 9). Bruun and Edmondson 2015: 576–577. Grubbs 2002: xviii. The three or more children need not be all still alive at the time of the legal act.
- 74 Some women explicitly requested to be granted this right: P. *Coll. Youtie* II 67 (AD 260) = R141; P. *Oxy* 12 1467 (AD 246) = R142.

1 Women's social status in Greco-Roman Egypt

This chapter will discuss the social and legal status of women in Greco-Roman Egypt as disclosed by papyri¹ such as women's letters,² legal documents³ and census lists.⁴ Women's social and legal status changed according to their age, their role in the household, their occupation and their relationship with other men and women. The legal documents presented in this chapter are marriage contracts and documents concerning women's management of property and their right to inherit property. It is important to examine these contracts here, because in the next chapters I will present more specific cases related to pregnant women, as well as unborn and newborn children.

This chapter will give a general survey about women and society, while those that follow will focus on social and familial behaviour that could be observed around women during the phases of pregnancy, childbirth and menstruation.

1.1 The status of girls

The status of young girls⁵ in Greco-Roman Egypt is hard to reconstruct because of the scarcity of sources, especially for the lower classes. Some scholars argued that girls, especially from poor families, might have been more at risk of being exposed than boys but the evidence is not conclusive.⁶ Some sources from Dynastic Egypt suggest that families had a slight preference towards male children. For instance, medical papyri suggest that the breast milk of a mother who had had a male child was considered a more valuable medicine for some treatments.⁷ However, the practice of exposing infant children is not attested in Egypt until the Greco-Roman Period, so it is likely that during the Dynastic era all children were kept, no matter what their gender or health condition. In Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, infant exposure was largely practised by lower-class families who could not afford to raise many children, or by slaves that wanted to give their children a better future, in the hope that someone would pick them up and raise them. However, women from higher classes could also decide to expose their child if they were no longer married to the father, because he had either died or divorced her. Papyri and legal documents do not provide sufficient evidence to establish whether girls were more exposed than boys. In a famous letter from Oxyrhynchos,⁸ a man named Hilarion asked his wife Aline whether she had already given birth, and he explicitly asked

her to expose the baby in the dung if it was female. Judging exclusively from this letter, it would seem that girls were the more likely to be exposed, but a study carried out by Sarah Pomeroy on copronyms (special names given to exposed children), showed that those exposed had many masculine names as well.⁹ Yet the data from both the Ptolemaic and the Roman census lists¹⁰ suggest that girls outnumbered boys in those exposed.

Boys were certainly more valued by Greek families and it is possible that a poor family that had to decide between raising a boy or girl would choose the boy. However, it is likely that girls were simply under-reported in the preserved census documents rather than being less numerous because of selective exposure.¹¹ Indeed, the Roman census is a rather unreliable source of information about children: both sexes were often excluded from it as they were equally irrelevant for tax purposes. Equally, the names of children on some papyri could have been lost because they were written at the bottom, which was more subject to erosion.¹² When girls reached their teens, their marriageable age, they were more likely to be registered;¹³ when this did occur, their names followed those of the boys in the family. Birth registrations, documents that are poorly preserved sadly,¹⁴ are far more useful here than the census, since the children of Roman citizens were all registered immediately after their birth, in order to acquire Roman status.

However, since the Dynastic Period, the iconography does not show any particular gender distinctions between boys and girls. Boys were often represented in tomb paintings in the same way as girls: smaller than adults and occasionally wearing a protective necklace.¹⁵

In Dynastic Egypt any mention of female education is scarce, but becomes more frequent during the Greco-Roman Period.¹⁶ Literacy seems to have been more common in wealthier families, and some women were not only literate but were able to become teachers.¹⁷ Female teachers are mentioned in papyri and commemorated by funerary paintings. Several 1st–3rd century AD papyri call female teachers δεσκάλη or ἡ δέσκαλος,¹⁸ and a 1st century AD mummy portrait from Hawara that represents a woman called Hermione, identifies her as a teacher, thanks to the inscription (γραμματική).¹⁹

Female teachers had a higher level of literacy, but other girls could also receive a more basic education at home from their mothers, such as the girl Aurelia Charite, who wrote in the same uncertain style as her mother.²⁰ Demotic was less accessible to women than Greek in the Hellenistic Period, as it was mainly taught in the temples, but there are some exceptions.²¹

Greeks and Greek-speaking Egyptians could learn Greek in the schools of *metropoleis* and in village schools.²² In *metropoleis* there existed cultural centres called *gymnasia*, whose membership became increasingly exclusive and, in the Roman Period, it gave both its young male and female members an official status.²³ The education of children was considered effective when it was accompanied by strict discipline, which could include corporal punishment.²⁴

Literacy guaranteed women more independence in legal acts and private correspondence because they did not have to use scribes and, even if they did, they had the chance to check what was written on their behalf.²⁵ Both boys and girls

could receive an apprenticeship to develop a practical skill, the nature of which depended on their social position. If they were rich, they were trained to become a manager of their own future estates. At the lower social level, although there was less differentiation in the activities of boys and girls,²⁶ more often girls were trained in menial house work, such as cleaning, cooking or spinning wool, not unlike female slaves.²⁷

Despite the near invisibility of young girls in Greco-Roman Egyptian society, letters survive where fathers show a clear attachment to their young daughters.²⁸ As with boys, many girls sadly died before reaching adulthood, something made clear from the Roman funerary evidence. Only wealthy individuals could afford mummy portraits, while others were only wrapped, and identified solely by a wooden mummy label. Some wealthy families from Roman Hawara buried their young daughters very richly: a mummified baby girl, who died aged between thirty months and 3 years, was covered by a wooden portrait where she was represented wearing jewels.²⁹ The body of a 5–7-year-old girl was covered by a gilded mummy case representing a woman with naked breasts.³⁰ Perhaps the ornaments in the portrait and the fully developed body in the mummy case were both to compensate for these girls not achieving their womanhood.³¹ Epitaphs more explicitly show the grieving of the daughters' parents: one describes a young Lysandre, who has died too soon, destroying her own aspiration of becoming a woman, a bride and a mother, and her parents' hope to have grandchildren and economic support in their old age.³²


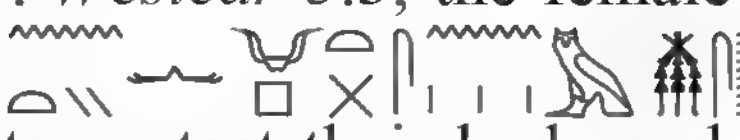
From 2nd century AD Tuna el Gebel, there are two attestations of special honours for prematurely deceased girls. One is a richly painted monumental tomb, showing a woman depicted both in Egyptian and Greek style;³³ the other is an epitaph dedicated by a father to his daughter, drowned in the Nile.³⁴ As with Hadrian's lover Antinous, the girl is not described as having drowned, but as 'snatched by the Nymphs'; this supernatural narrative almost 'deifies' the girl.

1.2 Coming of age

Coming of age can be described as the passage from childhood to adulthood. This transition occurs not only when there is a physical change of the body, but also when there is a social acknowledgement of this change. The social acknowledgement of womanhood consists of a celebration: either a rite of passage or an initiation rite. According to modern anthropologists, female initiation rites can be defined as a group of events mandatory for all girls of a particular society. The initiation rite may be a cultural elaboration of the menarche, but it does not include betrothal or marriage, and female initiation rites extend to all members of a society, not only a few groups, so are a rare phenomenon.³⁵ Therefore, the ceremonies surrounding the coming of age in Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Greco-Roman Egyptian societies cannot strictly be called 'initiation rites', since none of these cultures adopted a universal form of celebration for this event. A better term to define the 'coming of age' in these ancient societies is therefore not 'initiation rites' but 'rites of passage'.

The rites of passage for individuals and groups, according to Van Gennep, include rites of separation, transition rites and rites of incorporation.³⁶ The passage from childhood to womanhood through marriage is a typical rite of passage because it often assumes the separation of a girl from her family, the transition through betrothal and marriage, and her incorporation into a new family. Between the stages of childhood and womanhood, the coming of age is a liminal phase invested by societies with a complex symbolism. The girl who becomes a woman-to-be acquires a higher social value, but she is also more vulnerable because puberty gives her the ability to conceive. Therefore, another important aspect of this liminal phase for many cultures is a temporary protective seclusion.³⁷ This may also be tied into the fact that the blood of menarche has for many ancient and modern societies, a 'polluting' effect for communities and individuals.³⁸

1.2.1 *Coming of age in Dynastic Egypt*

In Egypt, the transition of a girl from childhood to adulthood is attested both in iconography and in the change of terms used to define her. A girl who reached marriageable age was called  *nfr.t*, 'the beautiful one'.³⁹ In the story of the boating party in P. *Westcar* 5.3, the female rowers who have not yet given birth are called *nfrwt*: ⁴⁰ The *nfrwt* often wore a girdle, which was supposed to protect their body and to enhance their fertility.⁴¹ The change of terms for naming Egyptian women was due to marriage: the most common terms for wife were *s.t*, *hmt*, often with the addition of the title *nbt-pr*, 'mistress of the House'.

Once a girl developed her feminine forms, becoming *nfrt*, she also reached her peak of beauty, fertility and sexual power.

Female goddesses played a key role in the transition of young Egyptian women to adulthood and this continued in the Greco-Roman Period when Egyptian goddesses combined their aspect with Greek ones. Young women in Dynastic Egypt were protected by Hathor, a goddess of love and fertility, who may have had a powerful and wild nature in her leonine version.⁴² Two other goddesses, Isis and Bastet, protected women's fertility and motherhood; Isis became associated with Hathor by the Late Period. Bastet was associated with Hathor because they both had a feline version; Bastet, as a cat, was considered the tamed version of the lioness. When Greek culture met Egyptian culture, the Egyptian gods were reinterpreted as Greek deities. Isis was interpreted as Demeter and Hathor as Aphrodite, which ultimately led to a strong association between Isis-Hathor-Aphrodite-Demeter. With Artemis, it was more problematic.

Artemis was a virgin goddess, a patron of the chastity of young girls, yet in Egypt there were no virgin goddesses, and therefore no equivalents.⁴³ Even the word 'virgin' is not attested in Egyptian. Yet Herodotus claimed that Bastet was the Egyptian interpretation of Artemis,⁴⁴ and through the assimilation with Bastet, Artemis was also associated with Isis. Artemis had a double nature in Greece: she is the virgin goddess who protects virginity and chastity, but she is also the goddess who releases the girdle of women, and blesses defloration and childbirth.

In Greco-Egyptian religious syncretism therefore, starting in the Late Period and especially in the Hellenistic Period, Artemis gives up her virginal aspect and her attributes as a patron of women's virginity, and becomes a mother goddess of childbirth.

1.2.2 *Coming of age in Greece*

Greek women reached adulthood through various stages: marriage, loss of virginity and childbirth. Greek freeborn girls were mainly educated by their mothers, who taught them practical skills and moral values. Mothers prepared their daughters for marriage and normally maintained a close relationship with them once they were married, including assisting with the birth of their grandchildren.⁴⁵ Some girls who reached marriageable age might have participated in religious rituals which ensured Artemis' patronage over their physical and social transformation. The most discussed of these are the *Arkteia* from Attica, a set of rituals associated, by Cole, with girls' coming of age. The *Arkteia* derive their name from the Greek ἄρκτος, which means 'bear', and were celebrated in Brauron in honour of Artemis, patroness of young unmarried girls and wild animals.⁴⁶

According to the myth, a sacred bear of Artemis had scratched an imprudent girl and so her brother killed it. Artemis became very angry because of this and the only way to appease the goddess was to sacrifice a girl on her altar. The *Arkteia* was seen as a way for girls to repay Artemis for this original offence, provoked by an imprudent girl; part of the ritual involving girls dancing with bear-masks while wearing special saffron-coloured garments. These scenes are described by Aristophanes in his *Lysistrata*, and are represented on miniature *kraters* offered to Artemis in Brauron.⁴⁷ Another dedication to Artemis was the final act of this ritual, where the girls took their garments off, showing their nudity, and donated them to Artemis. The entire ceremony seems to have been a ritual of death and rebirth – something seen in many rites of passage – where the girl ritually dies, having assumed the identity/appearance of a sacrificial animal, and then is newly born as an adult once she removes her garments.⁴⁸ The *Arkteia* was celebrated in Brauron, but similar rituals seem to have been practised in many other areas of Greece.⁴⁹

Artemis was the goddess of women-to-be, the παρθένος, who had to become a γυνή; in the transitional phase, a woman was also called νύμφη.⁵⁰ As Helen King states, Artemis was a virgin goddess, who never shed her own blood because she never had sexual intercourse; however, she caused other women to shed blood because she was patron of their passage to womanhood through their loss of virginity and childbirth. In addition, as goddess of the hunt, she caused the shedding of animals' blood, and she had animals sacrificed in her honour.⁵¹

Sexual intercourse was seen by Greeks as healthful and fundamental for girls, not only for reproduction but also to safeguard their health.⁵² In the *Hippocratic Diseases of Virgins*, virgins are recommended to marry young in order to have sexual intercourse and to bear children: the consequence of a delayed intercourse are described as being very dangerous for the girl, because her womb is

not opened and the menstrual blood cannot flow externally.⁵³ The Hippocratics claimed that the menstrual blood retained in the body could reflow internally, reaching the heart and the mind and cause a sense of suffocation and a desire to die.⁵⁴ However, intercourse and childbirth had to happen within wedlock, otherwise Greek girls would lose their respectability.

In Greek literature and myths, respectable girls seem to be quite exposed to the risk of rape, so that they do not walk alone in the streets and are protected in the house by their father.⁵⁵ Apparently, not even the loftiest of Greek gods, Zeus, could resist beautiful girls,⁵⁶ yet, at the same time, Zeus himself was the traditional protective father of three young virgins: Hestia, Athena and Artemis. Helen King has shown that these three virgins represent three different sides of virginity.⁵⁷ Hestia stayed at home and was devoted exclusively to her father until her marriage; Athena was a virgin because of her fierce refusal of intercourse and reproduction. Artemis was 'granted eternal παρθενεία by her father Zeus', and, thanks to her παρθένο nature, she could protect women in their passage from childhood to adulthood. The chastity of girls until marriage was protected by Artemis, and this protection was symbolically represented by a girdle, which was released only before the girl had sexual intercourse for the first time. The act of releasing the girdle (λύειν τὴν ζώνην) was performed by Artemis both for defloration and childbirth.⁵⁸ When the girdle was released in childbirth Artemis assisted women in this state with the name Εἰλείθυια, or Λοχία.

1.2.3 *Coming of age in Rome*

Roman women-to-be went through two liminal phases, which were underlined by a change of garment and of hairdress: menarche and marriage. With menarche, the girl got rid of her *lunula*, her *toga praetexta*, and dedicated her dolls to Venus.⁵⁹ However, the girl 'did not assume her final adult garments until she passed through an additional stage, that of bride'.⁶⁰

The unmarried girl was promised to a future groom by her father and *paterfamilias*, in a formal act called *sponsalia* (from the verb *spondere*: 'to promise'), which also included the exchange of a ring, the *anulus*. After that, she became betrothed and was called *sponsa* until the marriage, when she became wife, *uxor*.⁶¹ The second liminal condition of the bride was underlined by new offerings and a change of clothing. The day before the marriage, the bride gave away her dolls to Venus,⁶² and probably her *lunula* – her protective amulet in the shape of a crescent moon (Figure 1.2)⁶³ – to the Lares.⁶⁴ The domestic shrine of the Lares was situated in the *atrium*, the space of the house where the coming of age rituals seem to have taken place.⁶⁵ On the day of the wedding, her hair was made in a complex way; it was parted into six locks (*sex crines*), fastened by woollen bands (*vittae*), topped by a crown (*corona*) and covered with a yellow veil (*flammeum*). She wore a white tunic (*tunica recta*) with a belt around the waist tied by a knot, named the *nodus Herculeus*.⁶⁶ This knot was allowed to be untied only by the husband on the first night of marriage, and it had two functions: it protected the virginity of the girl, as in Greece; but it was also believed to guarantee better

fertility once it was untied.⁶⁷ Also, the six locks and the garment protected the bride's virginity and purity, since they were the same as those worn by the six Vestals, the virgin priestesses of Vesta.⁶⁸

1.2.4 Coming of age in Greco-Roman Egypt

Girls in Greco-Roman Egypt married for the first time in their early teens and marriage was a very informal act, carried out privately by the two spouses or their families. The government was not involved nor notified, either of the marriage or of a divorce. People could marry more than once in their lives, but the first marriage was considered more important for their social recognition. Women could also decide not to marry at all, and stay in their father's house.⁶⁹

Dominic Montserrat noticed two possible rites of passage for unmarried women in papyri: the *μαλλοκούρια* and the *θεραπευτήρια*. He interpreted the *μαλλοκούρια* as a rite which involved both girls and boys, and could have referred to the cut of the side lock they wore during childhood (fig. 1.1).

This ritual was probably accepted by both Egyptians and Greeks because the cut of the side lock was typically Egyptian, and the act of offering hair at puberty was also typically Greek.⁷⁰ The other ritual, the *θεραπευτήρια*, seems to have been a rite of passage only for girls; Montserrat noticed it for the first time in three,⁷¹ or maybe four⁷² Greek papyri dated to the 3rd century AD, that come from Oxyrhynchos. This term was used in papyri to name the celebration of a young girl through a dinner organised by her father. It is not certain what this celebration

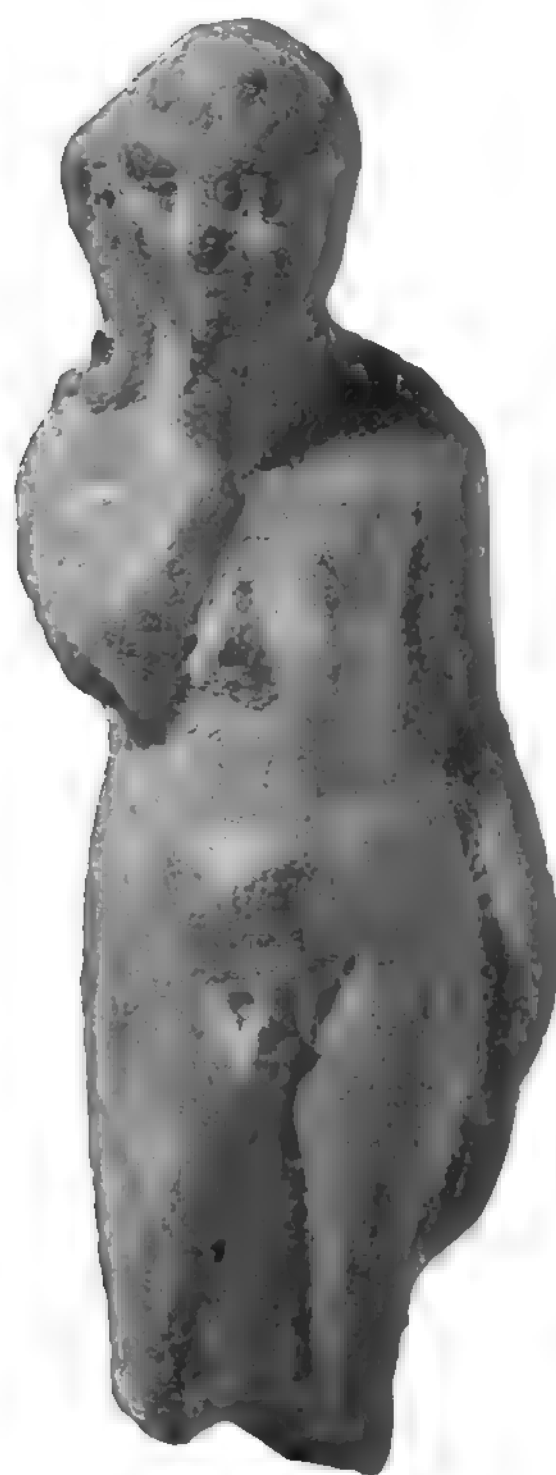


Figure 1.1 The child-god Harpocrates with a finger in his mouth and the side-lock of youth. Terracotta. 1st–2nd century AD. From Egypt.

was for, but it was related to the girls' coming of age: the girl still lived under the roof of their father, so they were probably unmarried.

The first two papyri examined by Montserrat are very similar: both are invitations to dinner in a private home, made by a father for the 'θεραπευτήρια of his own daughter'. The third papyrus mentions the θεραπευτήρια as a celebration which had to be postponed because of problems with the wine supplies.⁷³ These invitations belong to a larger group of dinner invitations which contain the recurrent use of certain verbs and nouns.⁷⁴ These dinners were always celebrations of important life events (marriages, weddings etc.), and it is thought that such sharing meals were meaningful rituals in and of themselves, that strengthen social bonds.⁷⁵ However, only the θεραπευτήρια seems to have been celebrated in a private home, something not attested for the μαλλοκούρια.⁷⁶

1.2.4.1 Previous interpretations of the θεραπευτήρια

In the last twenty years, only two scholars, Montserrat⁷⁷ and Huebner,⁷⁸ have dealt with the interpretation of the θεραπευτήρια. They both see the θεραπευτήρια as a celebration for an unmarried girl, probably connected to a rite of passage, but give different explanations as to its meaning. They both start by analysing the term θεραπευτήρια, a neuter plural from the supposed adjective θεραπευτήριον, which derives from the verb θεραπεύω. This verb could mean 'to worship' but also 'to treat medically'. Montserrat gave more stress to the former meaning, putting the θεραπευτήρια in a religious context, while Huebner preferred the second definition, giving it a medical meaning. Huebner saw the θεραπευτήρια as a festival to celebrate the recovery of the nubile girl from a circumcision in advance of marriage. On the contrary, Montserrat denied the existence of a widespread practice of female circumcision, claiming that θεραπευτήρια was associated with a temple ritual which somehow involved the girl.

His interpretation was derived from the interpretation of the word θεραπευτήρια in the context of temple rituals, focusing on its meaning of 'giving service, attending to'.⁷⁹ He also showed that the temple was an ideal place for a coming of age ritual because not only had it become central to Roman religious life but it was also increasingly chosen by families to celebrate life-crises through banquets.⁸⁰ In the context of the temple, the θεραπευτήρια could also indicate a temporary assignment of a priestly role to girls who had not yet reached puberty. In Ancient Greece, this kind of temporary temple service is described by Pausanias,⁸¹ sometimes with the use of the term θεραπεύειν.⁸² In his later work, however, Montserrat seemed more inclined to interpret the θεραπευτήρια as an offering made to the temple by the parents of a girl on the occasion of her coming of age.⁸³

Huebner's argument that the θεραπευτήρια refers to a recovery from female circumcision, comes from her view that female circumcision existed in Egypt since Pharaonic times and only disappeared very recently. She found similarities between modern celebrations following circumcision and the θεραπευτήρια: in both ancient and modern Egypt, girls are the centre of attention for their relatives, receiving gifts and being comforted with special meals. To further prove that

circumcision was an ancient Egyptian tradition, Huebner suggests this practice was not brought by Muslims as it is also practised by Coptic Christians, and Herodotus describes circumcision as an Egyptian custom.⁸⁴ Strabo also refers to circumcision as an Egyptian practice for men.⁸⁵ Diodorus Siculus seems to be talking about male circumcision as well, mentioning it as an Egyptian practice, when referring to the circumcised 'male Troglodytes'.⁸⁶

More convincing is the attestation from the Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria, who explicitly claims that Egyptians practised female circumcision. Philo wrote positively about male circumcision, and praised the Egyptians, who shared this practice with the Jews.⁸⁷ He claims that in Egypt both women and men were circumcised in their fourteenth year of age, but is not in favour of female circumcision. In his *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, he gives an explanation as to why boys should be circumcised and girls should not.⁸⁸ Other attestations come from the physicians Soranus of Ephesus (2nd century AD),⁸⁹ Pseudo-Galen,⁹⁰ and from Aëtius of Amida (6th century AD).⁹¹ All of them personally visited or stayed in Egypt, and so could observe the local traditions with their own eyes. However, they may have relied on indirect sources, as Diodorus did, who seems to have taken his account from the Greek geographer Agatharchides.⁹² In any case, these physicians present female circumcision not as a common practice, but rather as a surgical procedure, occasionally practised by Egyptians to eliminate the hood of an excessively developed clitoris, which could induce an inopportune sexual desire in females.⁹³

As Huebner also noticed, there is in fact only one Greek documentary source from Ptolemaic Egypt that mentions female circumcision. It is a petition dating to 163 BC that comes from the archive of Ptolemaios, *katochos* (recluse) of the Serapeum of Memphis. A young Egyptian girl, Tathemis, orphan of her father and abandoned by her mother,⁹⁴ lived at the Serapeum with her twin sisters, who served the goddess Astarte. The twins received a salary for their priestly functions, while Tathemis was a beggar who hoped to escape her condition by collecting enough money for her dowry.⁹⁵ Unfortunately, at some point, her mother Nephoris stole her money and Tathemis made a petition against her, receiving some help from a Harmais, a recluse of the Astarteion. In the petition, addressed to a Greek *strategos*, Harmais explains that Tathemis needed the stolen money for her marriage, in particular for a wedding dress, a dowry and a circumcision procedure. He also felt the need to explain that circumcision was an Egyptian practice,⁹⁶ assuming that the Greek *strategos* could have overlooked it.⁹⁷

According to Huebner, this document shows that female circumcision was common among the Egyptians, and was therefore not a medical procedure occasionally practised to treat particular genital malformations. However, both Montserrat and Thompson⁹⁸ seem right when they say that Tathemis' circumcision might have been a practice associated with her participation in the foreign cult of Astarte;⁹⁹ the Harris Magical papyrus, dating to the New Kingdom (1550–1070 BC) (NK), shows that the goddesses Anat and Astarte had received infibulation:

the sealing up of the mouth of the vulva of Anat <and> Astarte, the two great goddesses, who conceive though they will not give birth. It is by Horus that they are sealed up, it is by Seth they are opened.¹⁰⁰

Knight,¹⁰¹ examining the same classical authors discussed in Huebner's article, claims that the clitoridectomy was probably practised in the Greek-Roman Period but not in earlier times. In fact, there are no pre-Ptolemaic attestations of female circumcision in Egyptian sources; indeed, Toivari-Viitala reports many case-studies of mummies of NK Egyptian women who were found with their genitals intact.¹⁰² Knight states that circumcision in Greek-Roman Egypt, if practised at all, could derive from a misunderstanding of an ancient Egyptian practice. She also considers the possibility that Greek authors attributed circumcision to Egyptians, in order to create a bad impression of them for their audience.¹⁰³

1.2.4.2 *θεραπευτήρια and the Isis cult*

The meaning of the term *θεραπευτήρια* should be further analysed. Before having a religious or medical connotation, the verb *θεραπεύω* derives from the word group *θεραπευ-*, which means generically 'to attend', 'to look after'. From this generic meaning, many other subsidiary definitions developed: 'observe (a day/fast)', 'attend to (a day/fast)', 'attend to/look after (a god)', and look after/tend/heal (the sick)'.¹⁰⁴

From the original root *θεραπευ-* derived the common words *θεραπαῖνα/θεράπων*, which simply meant the 'household servant or attendant (a free person distinguished from a slave)'.¹⁰⁵ The religious meaning of 'attendance/worshipping' seems to have appeared earlier, and is more attested in the Roman Period than the medical meaning of 'healing'.¹⁰⁶

However, although the medical use of the word group *θεραπευ-* was probably less common than the religious one, it must have been in use at least from the 1st century AD. The Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo describes the *θεραπευταί* as a group of Jewish ascetics who lived in a community near Alexandria in the 1st century AD. Philo plays with the ambiguity of this term, claiming that the followers of the group were both 'religious attendants', because they had learned how to serve God (*θεραπεύειν*), and 'healers' because they healed the soul by their specific therapy (*θεραπεία*).¹⁰⁷

One of the earliest attestations of the term *θεραπευτής* as 'one who serves the gods, worshipper' can be found in Plato.¹⁰⁸ Later, in the Greco-Roman world, there are many attestations of attendants of gods described as *θεραπευταί*, who are mainly linked to the cult of Isis and Sarapis,¹⁰⁹ or that of Asclepius and Hygieia.¹¹⁰

The association of *θεραπευταί* with Isis is so long-lasting that it is attested in the 10th-century AD Suda,¹¹¹ which provides a valuable definition for these attendants: 'those who manage the holy places/temples, devotees of Isis of the Egyptians'. In the Suda, as in other earlier Greco-Roman sources, *θεραπευτής* became *θεραπευτήρ*, keeping the same meaning of 'attendant'.¹¹² As Taylor notes, the feminine form of *θεραπευτήρ* is also found and can be either *θεραπευτρίς*¹¹³

or θεραπεύτρια, both meaning 'female attendant'.¹¹⁴ It is worth noting here that the term θεραπευτήρια is the neuter plural adjective deriving from the masculine noun θεραπευτήρ, 'the things (=duties) of the (religious) attendants'.

1.2.4.3 A new hypothesis for the interpretation of the θεραπευτήρια

If we try to apply the meaning of 'religious attendance/worshipping' to the term θεραπευτήρια, we have to consider what kind of religious service an unmarried girl could participate in, and with what aim:

1. A service in a temple for an unmarried maiden: the services of temporary priests and priestesses in Egypt were diverse, and were considered not only a religious duty but also a source of income, as in the case of Tathemis in the Astarteion. The wealthy maidens mentioned in the Oxyrhynchos' papyri did not need to look for a source of income, but they could have performed a temporary service in order to acquire social respectability before they reached a marriageable age. In this sense, temple service could still be considered a rite of passage. It is uncertain whether the term θεραπευτήρια was used to indicate the whole service or just the celebratory dinner that marked its conclusion.
2. Initiation into mysteries: the θεραπευτήρια could be the initiation of girls into mysteries. In this case, it was not only a rite of passage but a permanent life choice. Plutarch dedicated his *De Iside et Osiride* to Celia who, according to the author, was initiated by her own parents to the mystery cult of Osiris, becoming a priestess at Delphi.¹¹⁵
3. Dedication/consecration¹¹⁶ to Isis: the θεραπευτήρια could have been the consecration of a girl's chastity to Isis, which was celebrated by a private banquet. The practice of consecration of maidens to Isis is attested in 1st- and 2nd-century AD Greece. A case of consecration to Isis appears in Xenophon's romance *Ephesiaca*:¹¹⁷ two young lovers, Antheia and Habrocomes, swear eternal love to each other, but they face many adverse events until they can finally marry. Antheia is kidnapped by pirates and she is almost raped many times, but, cunningly, she always escapes. When she is assaulted by a certain Psammis, she begs him to respect her chastity, which is protected by a consecration to Isis carried out by her father. This consecration, according to Antheia, is still valid for one year. The consecration of young daughters to Isis by their fathers, or both their parents, is also attested in three 2nd-century AD stelae from Attica.¹¹⁸

The papyri which mentioned the θεραπευτήρια are all from Oxyrhynchos and therefore may relate to the local temple of Isis, Sarapis and Athena-Thoeris. Two 2nd- and 3rd-century AD papyri¹¹⁹ mention generations of young priestesses in this temple, calling them 'sacred virgins' (ιεραὶ παρθένοι) who performed a temporary priestly service for the goddess Athena-Thoeris.

From the current evidence it is not possible to say that these virgin priestesses are the same as the unmarried women performing the θεραπευτήρια, but the

connections of this ritual both with the coming of age and with Isis suggest that that these girls had some relationship with this important temple.

Whether it was a prestigious temple service for unmarried girls or a simple dedication of their chastity to Isis (or Athena-Thoeris), the Greco-Egyptian practice of the *θεραπευτήρια* fitted well within Roman family law.¹²⁰ It gave girls prestige and a period of chastity that all Roman *sponsae* had to observe before their marriage.

1.2.5 *Conclusions*

In Egyptian, Greek and Roman cultures, the coming of age was the transition through menarche, marriage and motherhood. During this transition, the girl was in a liminal condition and was protected by goddesses: Hathor for the *nfrwt* in Egypt; Artemis for the *νύμφαι* in Greece; Vesta for the *sponsae* in Rome; Isis-Aphrodite (with several possible assimilations with Greek goddesses) in Greco-Roman Egypt. All these goddesses ensured fertility in marriage by safeguarding the bond between spouses, favouring conception during sexual intercourse and aiding childbirth. However, while Artemis and Vesta were virgin goddesses, who had the common function of protecting the chastity of girls before marriage, the Egyptian goddesses Hathor, Isis and Aphrodite were originally non-virginal fertility goddesses. Interestingly, when Artemis arrived in Egypt she lost her virginal aspects and became associated with Hathor-Isis. However, when the cult of Isis spread outside the boundaries of Egypt in the Hellenistic Period, reaching many parts of the classical world, it assumed some aspects of the Artemis cult. In the Greek world Isis, a non-virginal mother-goddess, became the patron of young women's chastity on the occasion of their betrothal.

The case-study of the *θεραπευτήρια* in Roman Egypt shows a Greek-speaking group of people who worshipped Greco-Egyptian gods and had adopted Roman social values. As the *θεραπεύται* and *θεραπευτρίδες* were primarily the attendants or worshippers of Isis and Sarapis, the *θεραπευτήρια* is probably a temporary service of unmarried girls for Isis, which included a sort of vow to guarantee their chastity. We cannot rule out completely the interpretation of the *θεραπευτήρια* as the 'recovering' of the girl from circumcision, as Huebner claims, but there are many reasons to question this theory.

The medical connotations of the word group *θεραπευ-* are probably later than the religious ones, and it appears more rarely in written sources. In addition, female circumcision is only attested in one Egyptian source, and mummies of Pharaonic women show intact genitals. At the same time, the later Greco-Roman sources are all written by classical authors, most of them describing clitoridec-tomy as an occasional medical treatment, and not as a social/religious practice. Finally, the *θεραπευτήρια* is compared by Huebner to an Islamic feast, which is still celebrated in Egypt today, for the recovery of young girls from circumcision: this modern feast is celebrated in the days soon after the operation, so as to retain its meaning. Yet, due to the banal reason of a lack of good wine, the *θεραπευτήρια* in P. *Hels.Oxy* 50 is postponed to an unspecified date in the future, so surely has

another purpose. As such, I believe that the *θεραπευτήρια* was a rite of passage involving a religious ritual.

The descriptions of the *θεραπευτήρια* cast new light on the life of young girls in Roman Egypt. However, we also need to consider the chronological and geographical limits of our sources: there are no attestations of coming of age rituals in the Hellenistic Period, nor is there any information about coming of age rituals outside Oxyrhynchos. Therefore, at the moment we can only safely say that the *θεραπευτήρια* was a ritual performed by Roman citizens living in the area of Oxyrhynchos in the 3rd century AD.

1.3 Adult women

An adult woman's life-cycle can be observed through the Ptolemaic census data¹²¹ – collected from the population for the payment of the Ptolemaic salt tax – and from the Roman census returns.¹²² More information about women can be found in their personal letters as well.¹²³

One of the most common life events for a woman in her early teens in Greco-Roman Egypt was to get married, and the Roman census is more explicit than the Ptolemaic one for indicating the age of this first marriage for women.¹²⁴ Girls probably started getting married from their early teens – from about 12 years old, when they were considered fertile – until their late 20s; in their 30s about 80% were still married.¹²⁵ This means that a marriage could potentially give rise to lots of children if the couple did not divorce, or if one of the spouses did not die. Among the lower classes, malnutrition might have had an impact on women's ovulation and ability to conceive.¹²⁶

Marriage often meant a change of house for women, who either moved to their husbands' household (virilocal marriage) or set up a new house (neolocal marriage).¹²⁷ In a marriage between siblings, the spouses could also stay in their parents' house.

Ptolemaic census data also show a certain number of women living alone; they could either have never married, or have been widowed or divorced,¹²⁸ while Roman census data show that most women did not remarry once they had divorced or had become widows. Such widowed or divorced women can be distinguished in this data from those that were simply unmarried, because they had children deriving from a marriage.¹²⁹

Having a successful marriage was certainly a concern for many women, as shown by Demotic or Greek oracular texts addressed to Greco-Egyptian gods,¹³⁰ found in oracular shrines. The priests there were believed to speak on behalf of the gods, and based their responses on texts like 'The Predictions of Astrampsychos'.¹³¹ Predictions could be adapted to each devotee, and included a list with a range of possible questions that the devotees could ask, alongside another list with all the related positive or negative answers from the god.

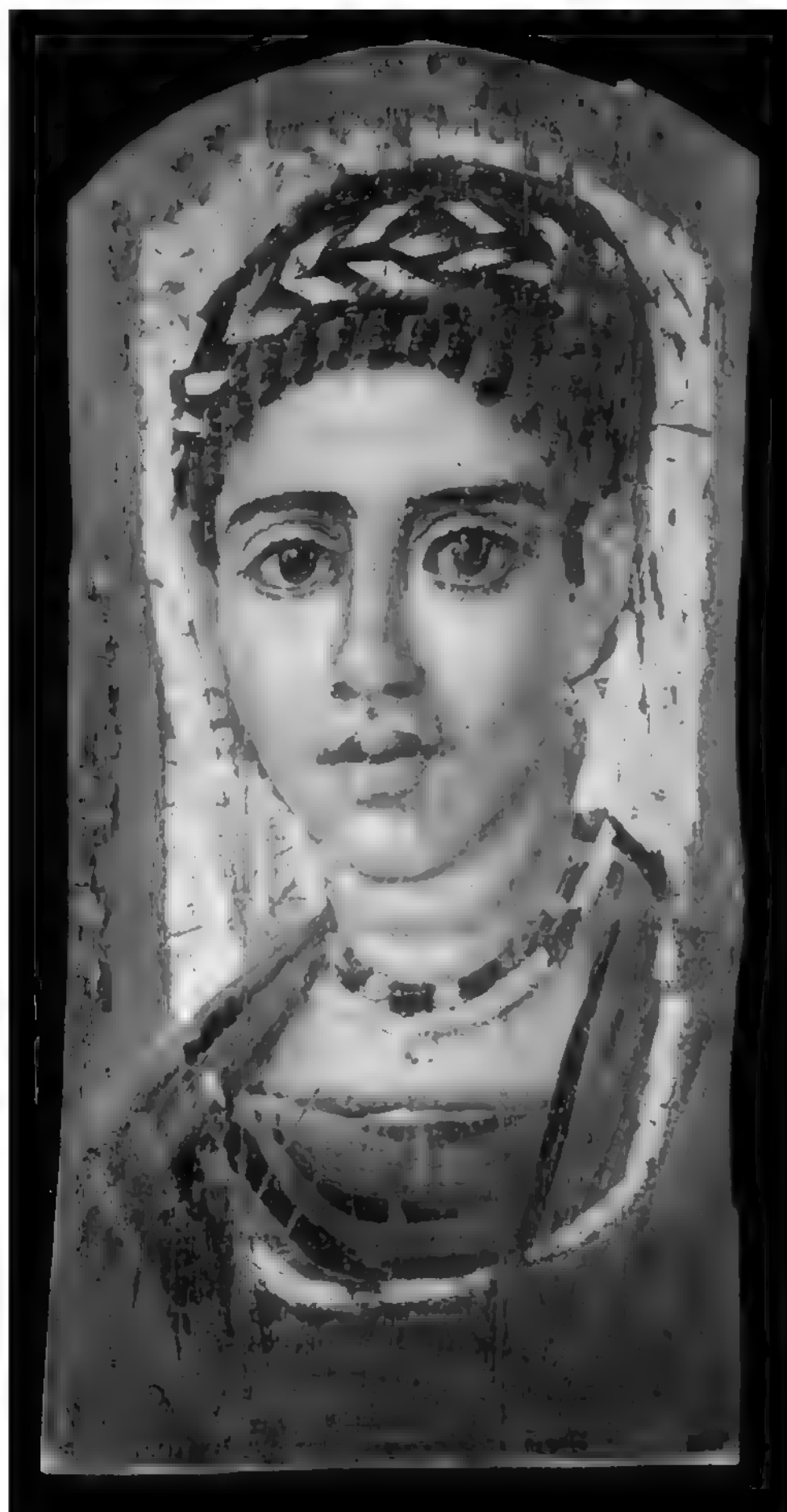


Figure 1.2 Head of woman. Terracotta. 1st–2nd century AD. From Alexandria (?), Egypt.

1.3.1 Occupations and social status

In contemporary society, a person's social status can be immediately observed through various indicators, such as their appearance, their clothes and their use of language. Unfortunately, such superficial indicators are unavailable when we study women in Greco-Roman Egypt (descriptions of women's clothes is too scarce and occasional, for example) so we need to dig further. We do know that clothes and hairstyles changed from the Ptolemaic to the Late Roman Period, and that there were local differences as well; for instance, Alexandrian fashion tended to be more refined than that of the surrounding villages.¹³²

However, the adult women represented in mummy portraits, with elegant clothes and refined hairstyles, could simply be representations of them on their marriage day, while in everyday life, they were probably dressed in much simpler clothes, deriving from Egyptian and Classical traditions.¹³³

A better attested social indicator of women's status is their occupations, which varied according to their social position and status. Household activities, such as the preparation of food, provision of water and production of clothes,¹³⁴ tend to be described only in private letters, while occupations outside the house are mentioned both in letters and in the Ptolemaic census.

Women weaving at home produced clothes for their own relatives or to sell outside the home.¹³⁵ Women could be involved in every part of the production process, from the management of the enterprise to the spinning of the yarn. Normally, spinning was done by slaves, for whom apprenticeship contracts are known.¹³⁶ Most of the work was carried out in the courtyard, the open-air productive area of the house.¹³⁷ The head of the household was normally a man, but some women acting in this role are also mentioned.¹³⁸ Being the head of a household did not always mean that they owned the house, but some women did.¹³⁹

Women could also have a profession outside the household and familial sphere. Wealthy women could own and manage properties,¹⁴⁰ and enjoyed legal independence if they were literate. Many literate women lived in *poleis*, especially in Alexandria, and were doctors, philosophers, poets, teachers and scholars. The names of some women who worked in the *Mouseion* at Alexandria are preserved in later sources, even though their works do not survive.¹⁴¹

Further down the social ladder, some occupations, such as nanny and wet-nurse, were specific to women, while others were shared with men. The profession of midwife seems to have been a mainly female profession, and had a higher status than nurses.¹⁴² The profession of wet-nurse was normally carried out by freeborn women who needed money, or by slaves, who lived with the family.¹⁴³ The regulation of a wet-nurses' activity became more restrictive in the Roman Period,¹⁴⁴ when all the terms of the agreement between a wet-nurse and a family were carefully written down in contracts. In the only surviving Demotic contract of this sort,¹⁴⁵ an Egyptian family hired an Egyptian nurse who lived with them for three years. In Roman contracts, however, the nurse did not live with the parents of the child but rather brought the baby to her own home; this is the reason why some were accused of baby snatching.¹⁴⁶ Roman contracts also required wet-nurses to abstain from sex during the time of the service.¹⁴⁷

A positive view of nursing is apparent from a letter where two sisters try to persuade a third to nurse a freeborn baby, by claiming that it could be an enjoyable experience and also a well-paid job.¹⁴⁸ On the other hand, a Saraeus, the wife of a Tryphon, had probably no particular vocation for this profession, having chosen to nurse a slave child because she needed the money.¹⁴⁹ Nurses were employed by women who did not want to, or could not, suckle their babies themselves.¹⁵⁰ However, Greco-Roman Egyptian mothers often suckled their children; indeed they may have used breastfeeding as a form of contraception as they probably saw that it inhibited conception.¹⁵¹

Some women's occupations are listed in the Ptolemaic census,¹⁵² and seem to have changed little during the Roman Period. Some jobs, such as field worker or wool spinner, were not mentioned because they were menial or because they were done at home. Free women mentioned in papyri included beer- or wine-sellers,¹⁵³ musicians or dancers,¹⁵⁴ and even a camel-keeper.¹⁵⁵

In Ptolemaic Egypt, free women who did menial jobs had a low status, comparable to slaves. It is not by chance that they were called *παιδίσκαι*, like slaves or children; indeed many existing languages tend to designate people doing menial jobs with the term 'boy' and 'girl'.¹⁵⁶ Yet what is totally alien for us is the common use

of the Greek terms *παῖς* and *παιδίσκη* for indicating both slaves and free children: this again suggests that children had a very low status before their coming of age. Low status free women and female slaves were both called *παιδίσκαι*, although free women were given a salary, while slaves only received pocket money.

Free women with the lowest status were prostitutes, however,¹⁵⁷ although most were normally slaves, or women who renounced their freedom for a limited period of time in order to repay a debt. During this period, their service to creditors was called *παραμονή*, literally ‘an obligation to continue in service’.¹⁵⁸

Women also had an active role in religion in both the private and the public sphere. Within their private sphere, women were very much involved in various forms of private devotion.¹⁵⁹ The place for private cult was mainly the house, but women could also gather in the *θίασος*, a religious association created for cult purposes for mutually covering the cost of mummification when a member died.¹⁶⁰ In the public sphere women could be appointed as priestesses,¹⁶¹ generally serving as singers, dancers and musicians for temple rituals.¹⁶² They performed rituals for the Apis bull,¹⁶³ and some privileged Theban priestesses retained the traditional Egyptian title of ‘god’s wives of Amun’, while the Memphite title ‘wife of Ptah’ made its first appearance in the Ptolemaic Period. There were also priestesses of Greek cults, such as Demeter’s, whose mystery cult spread from *poleis* to Egyptian villages.¹⁶⁴ There were also lower categories of priestesses such as the *χοαχύται*,¹⁶⁵ the ‘libation pourers for the cult of the dead’, who received an income for their funerary duties.¹⁶⁶ The position of priestess could be inherited by a female relative with all its privileges.¹⁶⁷ The roles and functions of priestesses did not change during the Roman Period, when they were regulated by the Roman authorities.¹⁶⁸

1.3.2 *Women's private and public relationships*

This section explores the relationships of adult women both with their relatives and with people outside the household. I have deliberately chosen the ambiguous term ‘relationship’ since it can express a correlation either in terms of influence or power or in terms of feelings and affection. Considering these kinds of relationships allows us to define the position of women in the private and public sphere.

The census data from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt are not very helpful for researching the power of women within the household. However, the Ptolemaic census does give us some idea as to women’s position in the house by frequently mentioning them as heads of their own household. Interestingly, this happened not only in native Egyptian households, but also in Greek households, suggesting that the condition of some Greek women had changed positively after their emigration to Egypt. Nevertheless, all Greek women mentioned in the Ptolemaic census, even those who were heads of a household, were always associated with a male relative through a kinship term: they were described as ‘daughters of x’ or ‘sisters of y’ when they were unmarried, and ‘wives of z’ when they were married.

Kinship terms in the census and in private letters are also helpful in clarifying the nature of family relationships. However, the use of these terms was not always literal, and their misuse was due to the inaccuracy of the writer or to a precise

stylistic choice. For instance, in the Ptolemaic census, scribes were not very accurate and a mother could be mistaken for a sister.¹⁶⁹ Another problem is that in private letters dating from the Roman Period, kinship terms, such as father, mother, brother and sister, had acquired an affective meaning, and so were also used for non-kins.¹⁷⁰

Affection between both kins and non-kins are attested by many private letters. For instance, as happens today, people write to distant relatives or partners to enquire how they were, and show a certain concern when they do not receive a reply.¹⁷¹ Some letters between mothers and their distant grown-up sons also show a positive relationship, based on love and respect.¹⁷²

Women were not completely subordinate to their husbands. Greek marriage contracts from Egypt state that women could not leave their house and spend the night elsewhere,¹⁷³ but it is also clear that Greek husbands did not always impose such seclusion. In about forty private Greek and Coptic private letters on ostraca and papyri¹⁷⁴ we see women leaving the home for various reasons, such as to assist someone in childbirth, to visit relatives or to manage their business.

Both Greek and Egyptian husbands express their affection for their now deceased wives in funerary inscriptions and monuments. An Egyptian husband dedicated a funerary monument to his wife in the necropolis of Saqqara with a hieroglyphic funerary inscription celebrating her achievements, her personal qualities and wishing her an enjoyable afterlife.¹⁷⁵ A Greek (or Hellenised Egyptian) husband from Alexandria dedicated a very different epitaph to his wife, with a mournful tone and a negative view of the afterlife;¹⁷⁶ however, he concluded by promising his wife that he would do his best to raise their children. Thus, even though the Egyptian and Greek husbands had different views about death and the afterlife, they both expressed feelings of deep affection and respect for their wives.

Equally, however, there were also abusive and unloving husbands. In a Demotic mummy label at the Brooklyn Museum,¹⁷⁷ a woman is described as a victim of her husband. The pain and bitterness can still be seen in her funerary label, probably commissioned by her relatives:

Obverse

'T3-šr.t-p3-ṣrwṣrw daughter of Pn-T3-wrṣe.t.

she being mistreated by her husband

Reverse

Her heart is not happy
at his hand
He took from her
everything of hers.'

Many Greek petitions also present women as victims of violence or sudden abandonment, especially at the hands of their husbands; indeed, some women

received help from parents or relatives in order to formalise a divorce and recover a dowry.¹⁷⁸ Others could not count on their family, and tried to recover their dowry through a petition to a *strategos*.¹⁷⁹

Women could also be victims of hostile legal steps taken by members of their own families, for economic reasons. For instance, we know of an instance where a father tried to separate his daughter from her husband,¹⁸⁰ arguing that he had the right to do so according to the old Egyptian law. However, in this case the Roman officials decided in favour of the daughter and her husband. Women were also robbed by male relatives¹⁸¹ or even by their own mother, as in the famous case of Tathemis, deprived of her future dowry by her mother Nephoris.¹⁸² Women, though, could also be the perpetrators of violence, both psychological¹⁸³ and physical.¹⁸⁴

1.4 Old women

A combination of census data for the age of first marriage and life expectancy can be used in order to understand what happened to women some years after their first marriage.¹⁸⁵

Sometimes women became widows many years before their menopause,¹⁸⁶ and in cases where they did not remarry, women could sustain themselves with the dowry, if they managed to receive it back from their husband, or the husband's family, after the divorce or his death.¹⁸⁷ If this did not occur, women with no dowry or inherited properties had to be maintained by a relative or by their own children, living in their houses. The practice of sharing a house with a dependant parent (or an in-law parent) seems to have been common in Dynastic Egypt. Dependent mothers moved to their offspring's house, while dependent fathers stayed in their own and received some money or goods from their relatives.¹⁸⁸

This Egyptian tradition continued into the Ptolemaic Period. Census lists do not provide any specific information about the money or goods received by dependant parents, but private letters have some examples.¹⁸⁹ For instance, an Apollonia, alias Senmouthis, widow of Dryton, was maintained by her children, even though her children imposed some conditions: she had to be judged by her children as 'irreproachable' and had to look after her two youngest daughters.¹⁹⁰

Filial support for widowed or divorced mothers was threatened by the high mortality rate which affected children; hence, in order to be sure of being economically sustained by her older children, a woman had to give birth to many.¹⁹¹ Some women were clearly afraid of being left without the support of their children, either because they moved elsewhere or because they were killed. A very touching late Roman petition from Hermopolis¹⁹² shows a mother grieving due to the murder of her daughter. The pain for her daughter's loss was made worse by her miserable condition, which had forced her daughter to become a prostitute. The officials of Hermopolis appear to have been touched by this case; even though the murderer was a high official in Alexandria, they condemned him to death and his goods were confiscated and given to the victim's mother to sustain her.



Figure 1.3 Portrait of an elderly lady with a gold wreath. Egypt, 100–125 AD. Encaustic, limewood.

Women were generally associated with an image of frailty, the elderly even more so. In legal acts and contracts, old women might decide to delegate more to their relatives, but there are also cases where older women act independently. For instance, a private letter survives that shows an elderly widow still actively involved in the family business.¹⁹³ Conversely, another old woman, who had Alexandrian citizenship but lived in Oxyrhynchos,¹⁹⁴ did not take part in a litigation herself, but rather appointed her grandson to act on her behalf. The woman explained that she could not participate due to her womanly frailty.¹⁹⁵ Rowlandson claims that the woman acted in this way not only because of her old age, but also because she was following Roman law.¹⁹⁶

1.5 Women's legal status in Greco-Roman Egypt

Hellenistic and Roman marriage documents are the legal documents which most effectively mirror women's social and legal status in Greco-Roman Egypt. In fact, these contracts regulated all the aspects of the private relationship between a husband and wife, so they can give us an idea as to how women were treated by their spouses.¹⁹⁷ From a marriage contract, we can, for example, infer what a woman had to do in order to be considered a 'respectable wife'. Marriage contracts also show whether the contractual conditions were the same for wife and husband; whether adultery was considered a serious matter; whether the wife was allowed

to play an active part in the contract or needed a male guardian who took decisions for her, and so on. Therefore, marriage contracts also seem to mirror a women's position in a cultural group: it is not by chance that in the pluralist culture of the Greco-Roman world single cultural identities manifested themselves clearly through the sphere of marriage.¹⁹⁸ Just as there were several types of family, there were several ways of getting married.

The marriage contracts of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt varied considerably not only in their language and formulas¹⁹⁹ but also in terms of their content. The bride and groom could set equal conditions, but more often than not one of them was clearly in a more advantageous position; surprisingly though, this was not always the man. Many other documents tell us about the rights of women to inherit and own property, to manage a business and to have various kinds of occupations and professions. So, as in marriage contracts, certain women had an equal position with men, while others seemed to be in a weaker position.

1.5.1 Marriage and divorce

The act of marriage in Greco-Roman Egypt is attested in Greek, Demotic, Latin, Aramaic and Jewish marriage contracts,²⁰⁰ but also in other collateral documents, like divorce agreements and marriage-related documents, such as petitions, rulings and laws.²⁰¹ A fully comprehensive study of all marriage and marriage-related documents in all the languages of Greco-Roman Egypt has yet to appear, however.

Of the 144 Greek marriage contracts from Greco-Roman Egypt that have been published so far, the earliest dates to 311 BC,²⁰² of these 27 date to the Ptolemaic Period and 113 to the Roman Period.²⁰³ These Greek marriage documents have been thoroughly translated and commented on by many scholars,²⁰⁴ but the study of the Demotic documents is less complete. Demotic marriage documents were initially studied by Spiegelberg,²⁰⁵ who compared them to their Greek equivalents, while the work of Pestman²⁰⁶ and Lüddeckens²⁰⁷ fifty years later is still important today, even if more Demotic documents have been translated and published in the meantime.²⁰⁸ Ptolemaic and Roman census lists²⁰⁹ also provide some additional information about the composition of the household.²¹⁰ Another important source for marriage in the Roman Period is the *Gnomon of the Idios Logos*, a corpus of legal clauses taken from Augustan law, but mostly revised in the 2nd century AD.²¹¹

According to Greek and Egyptian law, marriages did not need to be registered in a formal contract to be considered legal and valid. There were many ἄγραφοι γάμοι (unwritten marriages), which were as valid as the ἔγγραφοι γάμοι (written marriages). Marriage contracts were often written down many years after an ἄγραφος γάμος, and had the function of giving inheritance rights to the children of the couple. They were also made to create a written document in case the marriage ended with litigation between the spouses; petitions often used ἄγραφοι γάμοι as evidence.²¹² Sibling marriages are particularly underrepresented because they needed no formal agreement, since the property of the spouses remained undivided within the household.²¹³ However, surviving marriage contracts attest that some close-kin marriages formally followed the same rules as exogamous

marriages, like the restitution of the dowry in case of divorce.²¹⁴ Only from the Roman Period when all marriage contracts had to be registered, endogamous marriages appeared consistently in official documents showing that this practice was common not only among family with Egyptian status but also among the ones with Greek status; The Roman citizens were always excluded by such marriages by Roman law.²¹⁵

After the extension of Roman citizenship to all the inhabitants of the province in AD 212, brother–sister marriage was formally abolished in Egypt, even if it continued to be practised for at least another century.²¹⁶

Demotic marriage contracts were often made many years after the couple had lived together and produced children. Demotic contracts were different from Greek ones not only in language but also in structure and content, because they followed the precedent Late Dynastic legal tradition. Unlike Greek marriage contracts, Demotic contracts did not mention the personal rights and duties of the spouses (fines for infidelity, right to remarry, the prohibition of bigamy), and were exclusively concerned with the property rights deriving from the marriage. Interestingly, Demotic divorce contracts do not mention property, and are focused only on personal rights. This was probably because the property rights had already been well-defined in the marriage contract, both for the marriage itself and in case of divorce.²¹⁷

Demotic marriage contracts, dating from the 7th century BC to 1st century BC, were divided by Pestman into three types:²¹⁸

- Type A: *sh n hmt* ('document of/for a wife')
- Type B: (no Demotic name) a contract referring to the transfer of *hd n ir hmt* ('money of/for becoming a wife')
- Type C: *sh n s^{nh}* (*s^{nh}*-document) and *sh n db3 hd* (document concerning money).

Type A is attested in fifty contracts.²¹⁹ Type A is different from B and C because it was the only one where the husband had to give a gift to the bride (*šp n s.hmt*), usually a small amount of money.²²⁰ In many documents, the wife transfers her material possessions (*nkt.w n s.hmt*)²²¹ to the husband. In addition, type A is the only one in which the husband declares his marriage with the sentence: 'I have taken you as a wife' (*irzy tzt n hmt*).²²²

Otherwise, in Pestman's types B and C²²³ the woman brought an amount of money to her husband, and he guaranteed an annual allowance of clothing and food for her. In addition, the man offered his wife the property as a guarantee for the contract. The man could not end the marriage by giving back the *s^{nh}* to his wife unless she explicitly required it. If the couple divorced, the wife lost the right to be maintained by her husband, but, in exchange, the husband had to return the sum given for the food allowance by a certain time, otherwise he had to pay a fine (*q-hbs*) to the ex-wife.²²⁴

In all the contracts, children were indicated as the legitimate heirs of both the bridal and the marital properties even before they were born.²²⁵

Polygamy is another Egyptian practice which survived for a long time, even though it was not allowed by Greek law.²²⁶ Despite the opposition of Greeks, polygamy was common among Egyptians until the late Ptolemaic Period.²²⁷

The earliest Greek marriage contract attested in Egypt is dated to 311 BC and comes from Elephantine.²²⁸ This contract shows that the marriage followed traditional Greek law: the young woman had no active role in the marriage contract as the agreement was between the bride's parents and the groom.²²⁹ However, in the later Greek marriage contracts, there is an 'incursion into the Greek-speaking milieu of less restrictive Egyptian practices', which would have been unacceptable in traditional Greek law.²³⁰ Egyptian influence on Greek law was presumably stronger in Upper Egypt, which, in the Hellenistic and Roman Period, remained culturally more Egyptian than other parts of Egypt, such as the Fayyum or the Greek *poleis*. Upper Egypt was more Hellenised in the first centuries of the Ptolemaic kingdom when their control over the territory was more stable. Due to the instability of the last few centuries of Ptolemaic domination, Upper Egypt regained some independence, which can be seen in an increased use of Egyptian contracts.²³¹

There were two kinds of Greek marriage contract: the ἑκδοσις and the φερνή. The ἑκδοσις attests that the bride is 'given/gives herself' (ἐκδίδωμι) and the groom 'takes' her (λαμβάνω).²³² Unlike in Greece, Greco-Egyptian mothers could give their daughters in marriage, jointly with the father or by themselves. The φερνή attests the husband's reception of the dowry. The dowry was normally a quantity of money or a group of precious objects.²³³ Both ἑκδοσις and φερνή had in common the inclusion of the receipt of the dowry and the conditions for its restitution. If the couple divorced or the husband died the wife received the dowry back; if the wife died the dowry was given back to the wife's family.²³⁴

Between the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, there was a progressive restriction for husbands in their use of the dowry. At first, both husband and wife had the power of disposal (κυρεία) and physical dominion (κράτησις), and the φερνή was alienable through him. The wife could accuse him of abusing his powers and could revoke the dowry. In the Roman Period, other supplements were added to the dowry: the παράφερνα (jewellery and precious objects)²³⁵ and the προσφορά (lands and slaves).²³⁶ The husband was only administrating, rather than fully disposing, of the προσφορά, and the φερνή gradually became completely inalienable for him.

In Demotic divorce agreements, the marriage could be cancelled by the husband, by the wife or by both of them through a mutual agreement.²³⁷ Perhaps surprisingly, property is never mentioned, and nor is the reason for the end of the marriage. For instance, a man who wanted to divorce a woman wrote to her that she was free to take another husband and that he would not interfere with this.²³⁸ Similar Demotic divorce agreements started by the wife are not attested. However, women who wanted to recover their dowry could take an oath,²³⁹ swearing that they had been faithful during the marriage. Women who refused to take this oath were accused of adultery and lost their dowry.²⁴⁰ No extant Demotic divorce agreements attest that men who wanted to divorce had to take an oath.²⁴¹

Greek divorce contracts could be formally made by both spouses on the man's initiative (ἀποπομπή)²⁴² and the woman's initiative (ἀπαλλαγή).²⁴³ However, the divorce was initially based on the accusation procedure: the other person was declared guilty of not respecting the rules of the contracts. Therefore, a woman who abandoned the house without the husband's consent could be accused of having violated the terms that rule against this and she could lose her dowry. From the 2nd century BC, divorce agreements changed: the wife required the dowry and the husband had a fixed term by which he had to give it back and send the wife away. If a spouse left the house for a limited time, it could mean a temporary separation, while the restitution of the dowry normally meant the end of the marriage.²⁴⁴

In late Roman Egypt, most divorces were done by mutual agreement, but there is an interesting case from late antique Oxyrhynchos where a wife repudiated her husband because he was violent.²⁴⁵

Greek contracts mention not only the properties of the spouses but also their rights and duties. Some petitions demonstrate the existence of disputes originating from a violation of the rules by one of the spouses.²⁴⁶ A violation could be bigamy, which was prohibited for both men and women.²⁴⁷ In addition, wives²⁴⁸ or husbands²⁴⁹ who abandoned their spouse without a divorce agreement lost the right to receive their property back from the spouse: the dowry in the case of women and the property in the case of men.

Greek marriage contracts also contained a 'death clause', a section that discussed 'the devolution of the property of the predeceased spouse on the surviving one and on their common children'.²⁵⁰ If a couple had children, the surviving partner had to manage the property for the benefit of their children until they reached puberty.²⁵¹ If there were no children, the surviving partner had no rights to the property of the deceased and had to give it back to the deceased's relatives. If the husband died, the wife could be the guardian of her children together with another man appointed by her, but if this man died, she could act as a guardian by herself. If a married woman died with no children, her husband had to return the dowry to her relatives. If the husband died with no children, the husband's relatives could inherit the property but only after a punctual restitution of the dowry to the widow. If there was a delay in returning the dowry, the widow inherited the husband's property permanently.²⁵²

In the Ptolemaic Period, royal legislation set special conditions for the wives of soldiers sent to war by the Ptolemies. In fact, soldiers' wives were members of the ἀποσκευαί, religious guilds made to protect each other's interests, and this membership guaranteed them a special status, especially when their husbands were away at war.²⁵³

In the case of Roman citizens, the procedures for the marriage contracts were completely different. From their arrival in Egypt, Romans took care to distinguish themselves from Greek citizens and from Egyptians in order to preserve their status and social privileges, such as their exemption from the capitation tax. Hence, unlike Egyptians, the Romans never omitted to formally register their births, deaths and marriages according to Roman law.²⁵⁴

One of the most widely published marriage contracts following Roman law (*Lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus*) is the contract where the Roman citizen C. Antistius Nomissianus gives his daughter Zenarion to the Roman citizen M. Petronius Servilius.²⁵⁵ The document regulated the attribution of a dowry to the bride by her father, and formalised the oral promise of a dowry (*dotis dictio*) to the groom. The contract listed the objects included in the dowry, and seven Roman citizens appointed as witnesses assisted the entire transaction.²⁵⁶

An important factor when discussing matters of Roman marriage is the marriage ban imposed on all soldiers during their military service.²⁵⁷ Service lasted for twenty years in the case of legionaries and twenty-five in the case of auxiliaries. During the years of the ban, many soldiers had concubines and children, but they could not make their marriage legal or recognise their children until the end of their military service (*honesta missio*) and the receipt of a military diploma.²⁵⁸ Soldiers had no legal obligations towards their children born during military service: the child of a soldier was in legal terms fatherless;²⁵⁹ such a child is described as a ἄπατωρ (fatherless) or χρηματίζων μητρός (literally: 'being called after the mother' but normally translated as '(officially) described as the son of his mother X').²⁶⁰ According to the *Gnomon of the Idios Logos*,²⁶¹ a soldier who wanted to provide for his children could do so by writing a will during or after his military service.²⁶²

1.5.2 *The right to inherit, own and sell property*

According to Egyptian law, women had full rights to inherit goods, to leave their inheritance by a will,²⁶³ and to manage their own business independently from their father and then from their husband.²⁶⁴ The situation as regards landholding for women changed considerably between the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods. In the first century of the Ptolemaic Period, men owned and managed most of the land in Lower and Middle Egypt, particularly in the Arsinoite nome, where the cleruchic land was assigned to soldiers, the gift estates or δωρεά to high officials, and the royal land to royal farmers.²⁶⁵ Cleruchic land was given by the Ptolemies to mercenaries to convince them to stay in Egypt, however, these mercenaries often leased their κλήροι out and lived in Alexandria. Leasing was the only way for a woman to have access to a κλήρος in the 3rd century BC,²⁶⁶ but δωρεά could neither be owned by nor leased to women.²⁶⁷

There were a few exceptional cases of female ownership of royal lands, sacred lands and private lands; most of the private lands owned by women were vineyards.²⁶⁸ However, in Upper Egypt, a less Hellenised area both culturally and legally, women possessed and cultivated arable land, thus continuing the Egyptian tradition.²⁶⁹ From the Roman Period women could buy or sell land, and cleruchic land became inheritable also by daughters.²⁷⁰

Private letters show women's direct involvement in the management of land,²⁷¹ money²⁷² and the trading of goods.²⁷³ They could also jointly manage a business with their husbands or give it to someone on their behalf when they were absent.²⁷⁴ Women personally dealt with public officials about problems

concerning taxation.²⁷⁵ Female landowners, just like their male equivalents, oversaw the management of their own estates and gave orders to their caretakers.²⁷⁶ A particularly active role in estate management is shown by an Arsinoe, who wrote to her sister Sarapias, saying that 'she will try to collect her rents if the roads are firm'.²⁷⁷ In some letters, women gave orders or made requests relating to the household to males who were not caretakers but relatives.²⁷⁸

There are also attestations of women working the land for wages,²⁷⁹ leasing land and managing agricultural activities.²⁸⁰ In the Roman Period, women could also receive land as a dowry, even if it was not officially included in the list of goods.²⁸¹

Women and men in Roman Egypt seemed to have equal rights when it came to the possession of lands, but did not have equal duties. In the Roman Period, male landowners were assigned a portion of, normally not very fertile, public land on which they had to pay taxes. The quantity of public land was proportionate to the annual income deriving from the private land they owned. Female landowners were mostly exempted from this tax, which was considered an excessive burden for them. An exception to this can be seen in a late Roman petition, where a wealthy female landowner complained about her assigned public allotment, claiming that she was too weak to cultivate it with no help from any man.²⁸² This exemption from the tax on public lands must have induced more women to buy some.

Women could also inherit, own, sell and buy other immovable goods: entire houses or parts of houses,²⁸³ but also religious precincts, fulleries, as well as production areas with millstones and grinding machines.²⁸⁴

Women could also own a special category of possession: slaves. They could obtain slaves in two ways: through a will or through a dowry; it is unlikely that they would have purchased a slave themselves because it was normally too expensive.²⁸⁵ The cost of slaves depended on their gender, with males generally more valuable than females, but fertile females were more valuable than men because they could give birth to enslaved children. Other factors that affected the cost of slaves were their age and professional skills, but the most valuable were slave-prostitutes, as suggested by a papyrus from the Zenon Archive.²⁸⁶ A document from the same archive shows that most of the female slaves purchased by Greek families during the Ptolemaic Period were not native Egyptians; the majority were in fact imported from outside Egypt.²⁸⁷

There were other ways for a family to acquire slaves. They could be abandoned babies, adopted by a family and raised as slaves, or they could be purchased at a fertile age so that they could bear other enslaved children, which increased their value. Babies born into slavery were suckled by a member of the adoptive family or by a slave wet-nurse. Once they were weaned, they were either kept in the family or sold to another family.²⁸⁸ If a freeborn master had children with his female slave, he could decide to free his slave and children by will.²⁸⁹ The formal breeding of slaves, common in Rome, is not attested in Ptolemaic Egypt,²⁹⁰ Some freeborn Egyptians were also enslaved in times of civil strife, or during the civil war that occurred between Ptolemy VI and Ptolemy VIII in the 2nd century BC.²⁹¹

Both Greco-Egyptian and Roman law were very strict in terms of slave manumission, but for different reasons. Greco-Egyptian families were reluctant to manumit a slave who was a source of income. Therefore, female slaves were not manumitted until after they passed their fertile age, so could not bear any more children.²⁹² Other slaves were manumitted through wills, so they were freed after their master died.²⁹³

Women could inherit but could not write their wills themselves.²⁹⁴ However, in the Roman Period, women were allowed to pass on their property in the form of a *donatio mortis causa*. This gave their properties to their heir, or heirs, but the donation was effective only when the donor died.²⁹⁵

1.6 Preliminary conclusions

This chapter has presented the social and legal status of women in Greco-Roman Egypt by looking at a broad selection of private letters and legal documents. The evidence shows that the status of women changed according to the different stages of their life-cycle, with the most important moments of women's lives being the coming of age, marriage and motherhood. The legal documents presented in the second part of the chapter provide a context and solid foundation for the chapters that follow, that will present many specific case-studies related to women and children.

The evidence presented here shows that much progress has been made by scholars in understanding the social and legal status of women in Greco-Roman Egypt. However, much more multidisciplinary work needs to be done in order to move on from the prevalent philological and papyrological approach that exists, in order to reconstruct a more realistic picture of Egyptian women's daily lives. Demographic data, legal documents and private letters alone are not sufficient to explain the social perception of women in relation to their sexual and reproductive life. These topics are so complex that they need to be addressed in new ways. For example, the anthropological study of pollution I put forward in Chapter 5 will show how private religious practices could impact on the lives of women as much as written laws. Similarly, the archaeological study of domestic contexts for menstruation and childbirth I lay out in chapter 6 will show how women used the house in these ordinary and extraordinary moments of their lives.

Notes

- 1 Approach modelled on Rowlandson 1998.
- 2 Bagnall and Cribiore 2008.
- 3 Rowlandson 1998; Grubbs 2002; Keenan, Manning and Yiftach-Firanko 2014.
- 4 Hellenistic Egypt: Clarysse and Thompson 2009a and 2009b. Roman Egypt: Parkin 1992; Bagnall and Frier 1994 and 2006; Scheidel 2001; Pudsey 2011; Holleran and Pudsey 2011.
- 5 Girlhood is here considered by a modern biomedical point of view as the period of prepubescence which starts at birth and ends with puberty. The age in which puberty starts is highly variable from girl to girl, as well as the age for the onset of menstrua-

- tion; the Tanner scale is commonly used nowadays by doctors to define the stages of pubertal change in boys and girls. Marshall and Tanner 1969.
- 6 Pomeroy 1986 (Egypt); Demand 1994: 6 (Greece); Harris 1994: 11, notes 94–97 (Greco-Roman World).
 - 7 P. *Ebers* 763. Cf. Borghouts 1971: 112.
 - 8 P. *Oxy.* IV 744 (Oxyrhynchos, 17 June 2 BC) = R130. BL I 328, II.2 97, III 132, VII 130, VIII 237, IX 181.
 - 9 Pomeroy 1986: 147–161.
 - 10 Hombert and Preaux 1952. Parkin 1992: 19–27.
 - 11 Eyben 1980–1981: 5–82. See also Parkin 1992: 95–102. Harris 1994: 11. Grubbs 2013: 89–107 in Grubbs and Parkin 2013.
 - 12 See Parkin 1992: 20.
 - 13 Scheidel 2001: 149–151.
 - 14 See Chapter 4. However, the data provided by notices of births and deaths are more scarce than the ones of the census. Parkin 1992: 19; Rathbone 1993; Bagnall and Frier 2006; Johnson 2007.
 - 15 Graves-Brown 2010: 34.
 - 16 Graves-Brown 2010: 55. See case-studies of girls receiving an education in Cribiore 2001b: 87.
 - 17 Women were probably allowed to teach at the primary level. Cribiore 2001b: 81.
 - 18 1st century AD: P. *Mich.* VIII.464; P. *Mich.* II.123 *recto* col. 21.9; 2nd century AD: P. *Mil.Vogl.* II.76. 3rd century AD: *BGU* I 332; P. *Oxy.* 31.2595. Cribiore 2001b: 81. Literally ἡ δέσκαλος means the ‘lady teacher’.
 - 19 Collection Girton College, University of Cambridge. Rowlandson 1998: 301.
 - 20 P. *Charite* 8; Rowlandson 1998: 242, 301. Some women, whose writing was even clumsier, were defined in official documents as ‘slow writers’ to distinguish them from fluent writers. Rowlandson 1998: 301–302, pl. 36.
 - 21 Cribiore 2001b: 19. The twin girls living in the Serapeum in Memphis (see 1.2.4.1) were both literate in Egyptian.
 - 22 Rowlandson 1998: 300.
 - 23 Two 3rd-century AD attestations from Oxyrhynchos show parents registering their daughters at the gymnasia. P. *Corn.* I.18; P. *Oxy.* 43.3136; Cribiore 2001b: 34–35 note 78.
 - 24 Cribiore 2001b: 68–70.
 - 25 Cribiore 2001b: 75–76.
 - 26 Mirković 2005: 139–149.
 - 27 Cribiore 2001b: 82.
 - 28 For instance P. *Mich.* III 213–218 (Koptos, 3rd century AD); R111–14.
 - 29 Rowlandson 1998: 350–351. In the burial group dating from the early 1st century AD, there were also her brother, her mother Aline, and a man and a girl; the last two were probably the father of the girl and a sister.
 - 30 Edinburgh Museum inv. number A.1911.210.3. Walker and Bierbrier 1997: 82 no. 60.
 - 31 I will return to this when I discuss the objects from the tombs of prematurely deceased girls in Chapter 3 (pl. XVIII).
 - 32 I. *Métr.* 83; R273.
 - 33 Tomb 21. Rowlandson 1998: 337; Riggs 2005: 130–131, 135–136; Corbelli 2006: 28, pl. 27.
 - 34 I. *Métr.* 87; R26.
 - 35 Brown 1963: 838. See also Nanda and Warms 2014: 201–202.
 - 36 Van Gennep 2013: 10ff.
 - 37 Frazer 1913: 22–101. See section 6.2: I will show that it is not possible to talk about seclusion in Greco-Roman Egypt, but I will show some possible examples of bedrooms used by maidens.

- 38 See Chapter 5 about pollution through menstruation.
- 39 *Wb.* II, 258.4–5. Graves-Brown 2010: 53.
- 40 *ntj n wp.twzsn m mst.* P. *Westcar* 5.11. ‘whose body had never been opened by childbirth’. Transl. by Redford 2001: 168. See also Graves-Brown 2010: 53.
- 41 See a possible representation of the ideal of *nfrwt* with Isiac attributes in the Pharaonic female figurines examined in Chapter 5.
- 42 Traunecker 2001: 44.
- 43 Neith might be a virgin goddess even if her virginity is not explicitly stated, because she has no partner and because of her later association with Athena. But according to Lesko she cannot be a virgin because she is a mother-goddess: Lesko 1999: 58.
- 44 Hdt. 2.137.5.
- 45 Foley 2003: 113–138.
- 46 Cole 1984: 238. Dowden 1989: 15–17.
- 47 Cole 1984: 238.
- 48 Considering this, there could be a parallel between the *Arkteia* and Euripides’ tragedy *Iphigeneia in Aulis*: Agamemnon believes he has to sacrifice his young daughter Iphigenia to Artemis, but the goddess saves the maiden by replacing her with a deer. Interestingly, in the second part of the story of *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, Euripides narrates that after her escape from the sacrifice, Iphigeneia becomes a priestess of Artemis at Brauron (E. *IT.* vv. 1461–1463).
- 49 This is possible, according to Cole, because there are several attestations from Attica of rituals for Artemis with dancers and mummers. Cole 1984: 242.
- 50 Cf. Hom. *Il.* 9.560; Hes. *Th.* 298.
- 51 King 1983: 109–128.
- 52 King 1998: 205–246.
- 53 King 1998: 216. Childbirth: Hp. *Mul.* 1.2 Littré VIII, 14–22. Intercourse: Hp. *Mul.* 1.1 Littré VIII, 10–14.
- 54 King 1998: 205–246.
- 55 Dowden 1989. Rape was certainly prosecuted in Greek law, even if the conviction for rape seems to have been less serious than the one for adultery: Arnaoutoglou 1998: 17–19.
- 56 In the myth of Daphne, the girl is secluded by her father in a subterranean chamber to be safe from men. She is reached by Zeus in the shape of a shower of gold, and impregnated: Frazer 1913: 73–74.
- 57 King 2004: 51.
- 58 Childbirth: Sor. 2.6.1; LSJ, Hyp. *Fr.* 67 ζ. λύσαι to loosen the girdle for childbirth; Call. *Del.* 209, Opp. *C.* 3.56: λύσασθαι or ἀπολύσασθαι; Pi. *O.* 6.39 ζώναν κατατίθεσθαι. Defloration: Eur., *Alcestis*, 177, Kaibel 619.3; 684.3; LSJ, Philostr. *VA* 7.6.
- 59 Hersch 2010: 66–67.
- 60 Sebesta 2001: 47.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Hersch 2010: 66–67.
- 63 It is not certain whether girls sometimes wore the amulet called the *bullā*, like boys. This amulet was a circular pendant which contained some protective objects, like phallic figurines, and was worn by children until they reached puberty. Hinds (2010: 272–273) claims it was common to both girls and boys, while Sebesta remains vague about the *bullā*, only mentioning the *lunula* for girls: Sebesta 2001: 47.
- 64 Hinds 2010: 131, 270–272. On the role of the Lares in women’s coming of age, see Johansson 2010: 136–150.
- 65 Flower 1996: 200–201.
- 66 Hersch 2010: 71, 109–111.
- 67 Ibid.

- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Bagnall and Frier 1994: 111–115.
- 70 Montserrat 1991a: 46.
- 71 P. *Oxy.* 66.4542 (Oxyrhynchos, 3rd century AD); P. *Oxy.* 66.4543 (Oxyrhynchos, 276–300 AD); P. *Oxy.Hels.* 50 (3rd century AD).
- 72 Montserrat also mentions P. *Lond.* 3078 = SB 14 11944 (Oxyrhynchos, 2nd century AD). Montserrat 1990: 206–207; cf. Skeat 1975: 251–254. This papyrus is very similar to P. *Oxy.* 66.4542 and P. *Oxy.* 66.4543 because it contains an invitation to a dinner in order to celebrate a young girl.
- 73 P. *Oxy.Hels.* 50, lines 16–17: ‘περὶ δὲ τῶν οἰναρίων ὑπερεθέμεθα τὰ θεραπευτήρια εἰς τὸ μέλλον.’
- 74 Kim 1975: 391–402.
- 75 ‘The rite of eating and drinking together . . . is clearly a rite of incorporation, of physical union, and has been called a sacrament of communion . . . Often the sharing of meals is reciprocal, and there is thus an exchange of food which constitutes the confirmation of a bond’: Van Gennepe 2013: 29.
- 76 Montserrat 1990: 207.
- 77 Montserrat 1990: 206–207; 1991b: 43–49, Montserrat 1996: 46; Huebner 2009: 149–171.
- 78 Huebner 2009: 149–171.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 Montserrat 1996: 46.
- 81 Paus. 1.27.2–3; 2.10.4; 7.19.2; 7.26.5. Montserrat 1991b: 48, note 20.
- 82 Paus. 10.34.8. Montserrat 1991b: 48, note 21.
- 83 Montserrat 1996: 46.
- 84 Hdt 2.36.3; Hdt 2.104.2. In 2.36.3 Herodotus claims that circumcision is just an Egyptian tradition, while in 2.104.2 he extends the practice of circumcision to other populations (Colchians and Ethiopians at first, and then Phoenicians and the Syrians of Palestine). For the comparison between the two sections, see the commentary to Book II, chapter 104 by Lloyd 1994: 21–24. Further, in these two sections Herodotus does not specify whether the circumcision was for both boys and girls, or just for boys. Ghalioungui (1963: 69) and Asheri (2011: 264) compared 2.104 with 2.37.2, where the circumcision seems to be a priestly practice for men and not a practice among common people.
- 85 Strab. 16.4.17: ‘They go naked, or wear skins only, and carry clubs. They deprive themselves of the prepuce, but some are circumcised like Egyptians.’ Transl. perseus.tufts.edu.
- 86 D. S. 3.32.4.
- 87 Philo, *De Spec. Leg.* 1.2–3.
- 88 Philo *Quaest. et Solut. in Gen.* 3.47. Rowlandson 1998: 100 note 2.
- 89 Soranus’ chapter ‘on the enlarged clitoris’ is lost but ‘the chapter heading is preserved in the table of contents’. Cf Rowlandson 1998: 100, note 2. Later writers who were influenced by Soranus, described the clitoridectomy for an enlarged clitoris: Cael. *Aur. Gyn.* 2.112; Muscio *Gyn.* 2.76; Paul *Aeg.* 9.2.
- 90 Ps. Gal. *Intr.* 10, XIV 706.12–15 Kühn.
- 91 Aët. 16.105. The writer claims that women who were about to get married had to practise the excision of the clitoris when this was excessively protruding, causing a constant arousal in the girl. Cf. Rowlandson 1998: 100. Knight 2001: 327.
- 92 Sacks 2014: 50, 84–86.
- 93 For the clitoridectomy, see Cael. *Aur. Gyn.* 2.112; Muscio *Gyn.* 2.76; Aët. 16.105; Paul *Aeg.* 9.2.
- 94 P. *Lond.* I.24= *UPZ I 2* (Memphis, 163 BC).
- 95 Thompson 2012: 232.

- 96 Harmais says: 'circumcision as is the custom among the Egyptians'. Huebner 2009: 165.
- 97 Huebner 2009: 165.
- 98 Thompson 2012: 232; Montserrat 1996: 43.
- 99 Huebner does not agree, claiming that Tathemis would have married outside the Astarteion, so she was not forced to follow its religious rules.
- 100 *P. Mag. Harr. F.* III 5–10, lines 14–18. Quoted and translated by Montserrat 1991b: 48, note 19. Cf. Leitz 1990: 31–50, Pl. 12–25.
- 101 Knight 2001.
- 102 Toivari-Viitala 2001: 194, notes 100–102. However, Toivari-Viitala claims that circumcision was certainly practised from the Greco-Roman Period.
- 103 Knight 2001: 317–338.
- 104 Taylor 2006: 61.
- 105 Taylor 2006: 57.
- 106 The only attestation which Huebner (2009: 152) mentions to corroborate the link of θεραπευτήρια with medicine, is in the *Suda* which dates to the 10th century AD, but whose material goes back to Hellenistic times. In the *Suda* (Π 883) the term θεραπευτήριον is associated with the term ἰατρεῖον ('medical surgery') as a synonym or a specification.
- 107 *Encycl. Jud.*, 699 in Taylor 2006: 56–57.
- 108 LSJ, Pl. *Phdr.* 252c, *ibid.*, *Lg.* 740c.
- 109 There are attestations of attendants/worshippers of Isis and Sarapis as θεραπευταί or θεραπεύοντες: LSJ, *UPZ* VIII 19 (2nd BC); *IG* XI (4).1226 (Delos, 2nd BC). Cf. Taylor 2006: 57–58, notes 8–15.
- 110 Remus claims that the θεραπευταί of Asclepius were a strong group because people had the same social status, level of education and religious devotion to Asclepius. Remus 1996; Taylor 2006.
- 111 Suidas, 229. Quoted by Taylor 2006: 58.
- 112 Cf. LSJ, *Aristox. Fr. Hist.* 15; *Plu. Lyc.* 11; *Charito* 4.1; *X. Cyr.* 7.5.65; *Max. Tyr.* 14.2.
- 113 LSJ, *Ph.* 1.261, 655; *ibid.*, 2.471.
- 114 LSJ, *EM* 47.45.
- 115 *Plu. De Iside* 35, 364 E. If his account is reliable, this would be the most ancient source about the initiation of a woman into mystery cults. Heyob 1975: 58, 109.
- 116 As Bodet argues, the 'consecration was the legal and permanent transfer of property from the human or the natural domain to the divine realm'. Bodet 2009: 21.
- 117 O'Sullivan 1994: 25–26. The date might be 2nd century AD or earlier; cf. *ibid.*, for discussion of the attribution to Xenophon. The story of the dedication to Isis is also mentioned by Montserrat, 1991b: 49, note 22.
- 118 *IG* II 4067 and *IG* II 4068–4069 mentioned by Dunand 1973: 2.140 and 3. The consecration is expressed by the verb ἀνατίθημι: *IG* II 4069, and is from both the parents; *IG* 4068 is from the father only. Heyob disagrees with Dunand's interpretation, claiming that the second dedication is the dedication of a statue of the girl and not the girl herself. Heyob 1975: 67, note 61.
- 119 *P. Merton* 2.73, 163–164 AD. *P. Oxy.* 44 3177, 2–3. 247 AD. See a more detailed discussion of this in the forthcoming Nifosi 2018.
- 120 The girls mentioned in the papyri from Oxyrhynchos were certainly Roman citizens because the papyri date to after the edict of Caracalla (AD 212).
- 121 *P. Count*: Clarysse and Thompson 2009a and 2009b. Updated by the new database: <http://pcount.arts.kuleuven.be/>.
- 122 See notes 104, 324.
- 123 Bagnall and Cribiore 2008.
- 124 Pomeroy 1984: 89.

- 125 Bagnall and Frier 1994: 111–121; Bagnall and Frier 2006: 113, fig. 6.1; Pudsey 2011: 69.
- 126 In addition, Aristotle's idea that women required less nourishment than men (*HA* 608b,14) might have mirrored a common belief or observation.
- 127 Pudsey 2011: 62.
- 128 Clarysse and Thompson 2009a: 301–302.
- 129 Bagnall and Frier 2006: 123–127.
- 130 Troubled marriage: *SB* XVIII 14043 (Soknopaiou Nesos, 2nd century AD) = R256. Another oracular text found in an oracular shrine: *P. dem Berl.* 13538 (Elephantine, Ptolemaic Period) = R248. Three excerpts of oracle questions translated in R249: Botti 1995 (Tebtynis, 2nd BC); *W.Chr.* 122 (Soknopaiou Nexos (6 AD); *P. Oxy.* IX 1213 (Oxyrhynchos, 2nd century AD).
- 131 Rowlandson 1998: 282–224 and 317. Cf. *ibid.*: 284, note 1 for further bibliography.
- 132 More details on clothes, footwear and hairstyles throughout the Greco-Roman Period can be found in: Rowlandson 1998: 313–316.
- 133 *Ibid.*
- 134 Rowlandson 1998: 280. *SB* XIV 11881 (provenance unknown, 4th century AD); *SB* V 7737; *BGU* VI 1300.
- 135 Large-scale production appeared from the Ptolemaic Period. Pomeroy 1984: 163–165, 168–171. The estate of Zenon in Philadelphia, R200–201, was an example of large-scale production.
- 136 R204. Interestingly, no extant contracts are known for weaving apprenticeships for free women. Rowlandson 1998: 268.
- 137 See Chapter 6.
- 138 *P. Mich.* 8.464. A few letters involve women who are asking for help or having difficulties with the household: *P. Oxy.* 48.3403; *BGU* 3.822; *SB* 6.9026. Bagnall and Cribiore 2008: 79–80.
- 139 Clarysse and Thompson 2009a: 303.
- 140 See section 1.4.
- 141 Rowlandson 1998: 303.
- 142 See Chapter 2.
- 143 *P. Oxy.* I 91 (Oxyrhynchos, 187 AD). R214.
- 144 Only one Demotic contract from the Ptolemaic Period survives, while we know about forty contracts from the Roman Period, mainly from Alexandria. The Demotic contract *P. Cairo dem.* II 30604, has a Greek docket: *P. Tebtynis* II 279 = *UPZ* I p. 603 no. 2 (Tebtynis, 263 BC).
- 145 See previous note.
- 146 *P. Oxy.* I 37 (Oxyrhynchos, 49 AD).
- 147 *BGU* IV 1107 (Alexandria, 13 BC). See also *Sor.* 2.19 and *Gal.* 1.9.
- 148 *P. Mich.* III 202 = R231. Bagnall and Cribiore 2008: 77.
- 149 *P. Oxy.* I 37 = R91.
- 150 *P. Lond.* III 951. Bagnall and Cribiore 2008: 265–266.
- 151 *SB* XX 14303 (Ptolemais Euergetis, 147 AD) lines iii.21–iii.58. Rowlandson 1998: 88.
- 152 Clarysse and Thompson 2009a: 202.
- 153 *P. Lond.* VII 1976 (Philadelphia, 253 BC) = R209; *P. Oxy.* XXII 2342 (Oxyrhynchos, 102 AD) = R210. *BL* IV 65–66, VII 148. Bagnall and Cribiore 2008: 68.
- 154 *CPR* XVIII 1 (Theogenis, 231 BC) = R215; *P. Corn.* 9 (Philadelphia, 206 AD) = R216.
- 155 *P. Aberd.* 30 (Soknopaiou Nesos, 139 AD) = R211. *BL* III 211.
- 156 Pomeroy 1984: 133–140. Cf. *LSJ*, *P. Cair. Zen.* 142 (3rd century BC).
- 157 *P. Enteux.* 49. Pomeroy 1984: 147.
- 158 R198–99. Cf. *LSJ*, *SIG* 2863 (Delph.); “ἐγγύους παρά τινος λαμβάνειν παραμονῆς”, *P. Hal.* 1.48 (3rd century BC); *P. Hib.* 1.41.5 (3rd century BC).

- 159 Domestic and popular cults in Greco-Roman Egypt will be discussed further in Chapter 3.
- 160 This rule was not always respected, as can be seen in the petition P. *Enteux*. 21 (Kerkethoeris, 218 BC), R29: a member died and the other women refused to pay for her burial.
- 161 P. *Pt.* III and IX 7081a-7273.
- 162 See Chapter 5.3.
- 163 UPZ I 18 R (Memphis, 163 BC); Rowlandson 1998: 60.
- 164 Rowlandson 1998: 62.
- 165 LSJ, UPZ II 157.34 (3rd century BC), P. *Lond.* I 3.3 (2nd century BC).
- 166 Rowlandson 1998: 57.
- 167 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 226 a + Paris, Louvre N 2412 (Memphis, 304 BC). Cf. BIFAO 87 (1987), p. 270.
- 168 Rowlandson 1998: 61–62.
- 169 Clarysse and Thompson 2009a: 300.
- 170 Dickley 2004: 131–176.
- 171 Rowlandson 1998: 280.
- 172 P. *Mich.* III 203 (Pselkis, Nubia, 114–116 AD) = R74. P. *Mich.* VIII 490 and 491 (Karanis, late 2nd century AD) = R104-R105.
- 173 See, for instance, P. *Giss.* 2 (Krokodilopolis, 173 BC): ‘let it not be allowed to Olympias to be absent by night or [by day] from [Antaios’ house without Antaios’] permission’. Tr. in R126. BL I 168, II.2, VII 59.
- 174 Bagnall and Cribiore 2008: 81. Longer journeys by boat (*SB* XII 10840; *SB* V 8027), shorter by camel (*O. Mon. Epiph.* 352 descr.; *O. Medin. Habu Copt.* 150), donkey (*P. Oxf.* 19), and horse (*BGU* XIII 2350).
- 175 Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum 5857 (Memphis, 230–220 BC) = R272: translation of extracts.
- 176 177 Mummy label, provenance and date unknown. Brooklyn Museum inv. 16.645. Tr. by Hughes et al. 2005: 1, n. 2.
- 178 BGU IV 1105 (Alexandria, 11–10 BC) = R257. BL II.2 23.
- 179 BGU VIII 1848 (Herakleopolite nome, 48–46 BC) = R128.
- 180 P. *Oxy.* II 237 (Oxyrhynchos, 186 AD) = R138: coll. VI.4–VIII.7.
- 181 P. *Oxy.* XXXIV 2713 (Oxyrhynchos, AD 297) = R75. BL VI III, VIII 261. P. *Cair.* Isid. 64 (Karanis, AD 298) = R176.
- 182 UPZ I 18 R (Memphis, 163 BC); Rowlandson 1998: 60.
- 183 Love potions: in a unique marriage contract from Oxyrhynchos, (*PSI* I 64 [Oxyrhynchos, 1st century BC] = R255, BL I 390, IV 87, IX 311), a wife swears to her husband that she will not add any love potion when preparing his food and drinks. Love potions and other kinds of spells were used both by women and men. Rejected lovers could also curse their beloved ones: *O. Wien* D 70 (Prov. unknown, 50 BC–50 AD) = R287. Manipulative seduction: in a famous episode in the Demotic stories of Setna Khaemwese, Setna meets a beautiful priestess of Bastet called Tabubu. As soon as Tabubu becomes aware of her influence on Setna, she starts manipulating him, to the point that he agrees to kill his own children: P. *Cairo* Dem. 30646 (Diospolis Megale, Thebes East, 332–200 BC) = R288.
- 184 Against women: one of the most impressive cases is the story of Saraeus, attacked while pregnant by the previous wife and mother-in-law of her husband, Tryphon. The former wife is also accused by Tryphon of having abandoned him, after having stolen a part of his property. P. *Oxy.* II 282 (Oxyrhynchos, AD 37) = R88. BL III 130; VIII 234. Against men: an example of abuse of male slaves is attested by a poem of Herodas but, as a piece of literary fiction, I would not consider it totally reliable. Herodas’ verses tell the story of a rich woman who takes advantage of her privileged position to seduce her male slave: P. *Lond. Lit.* 96 (Alexandria, 3rd century BC) = R289.

- 185 After Bagnall and Frier 1994 and 2006. Pudsey 2011: 70.
- 186 *BGU* IV 1104 = R129.
- 187 See the discussion about the dowry in section 1.4.1.
- 188 McDowell 1998: 200.
- 189 Clarysse and Thompson 2009a: 304–305.
- 190 *P. Grenf.* I 21 (Pathyris, 126 BC) = Pomeroy 1984: 113 = R86. *BL* III 70; VIII 40; IX 95.
- 191 Rowlandson 1998: 85.
- 192 *BGU* IV 1024 (Hermopolis, end of 4th century AD) = R208: col IV. *BL* I 88–89, VII 17, IX 25.
- 193 *SB* X 10238 (Oxyrhynchos, AD 37) = R90. *BL* VII 217.
- 194 *P. Oxy.* II 261 (Oxyrhynchos, AD 55). R133. *BL* VIII 234.
- 195 *Ibid.*, lines 11–13: οὐ δυναμένη προσκατερῆσαι τῷ κριτηρίῳ διὰ γυναικείαν ἀσθένειαν’.
- 196 Rowlandson 1998: 178.
- 197 The contracts prescribed how couples should ideally behave. Their actual behaviour in marriage in many cases could have been very different of course.
- 198 Montserrat 1996: 80.
- 199 They could be oaths or contracts, written in Demotic or Greek, and could be stipulated between the two spouses or between the groom and the father of the bride.
- 200 Greek, Demotic, Latin, Aramaic, Jewish and Samaritan marriage and marriage-related contracts are included in the Instone-Brewer database: <http://www.tyndalearchive.com/Brewer/MarriagePapyri/Index.html>. Greek marriage contracts are also listed in Yiftach-Firanko 2003: 22–141. 113 Demotic marriage contracts have been published so far, in Kato 2008; Brunsch 1984; Hughes and Jasnow 1997; Lüddeckens 1960, 1968; Lüddeckens et al. 1968; Reymond 1973; and Pestman 1961.
- 201 See Instone-Brewer database.
- 202 *P. Eleph.* 1 = R123.
- 203 Yiftach-Firanko 2003: 22–141.
- 204 Some of the most important are: Maehler 1989, Rowlandson 1998, Grubbs 2002; Yiftach-Firanko 2003.
- 205 Spiegelberg 1906: 190–195; 1932.
- 206 Pestman 1961.
- 207 Lüddeckens 1960. Translation and transliteration of 70 Demotic marriage documents.
- 208 Their work complements each other because Lüddeckens is more devoted to the transliteration and translation of the documents and to a precise classification of legal formulas, while Pestman’s book discusses the legal implications of these contracts. In addition, *P. Mich.* II 121 contains 8 εἰρόμενα, Greek summaries of Demotic marriage documents: *P. Mich.* II 121 (Tebtynis, AD 42): recto II.2 (p. 29); recto III.1 (p. 45); recto III.7 (p. 52); recto III.12 (p. 58); recto IV.1 (p. 62); recto IV.3 (p. 66); recto IV.4 (p. 67); recto IV.7 (p. 72).
- 209 *P. Count.* Clarysse and Thompson 2009a and 2009b. Bagnall and Frier 2006; Holleran and Pudsey 2011.
- 210 While the Roman census gives some indications of the age at first marriage of men and women, the Ptolemaic census does not: Clarysse and Thompson 2009a: 294–295. The *P. Trophitis* maintenance contracts (*SB* XX 14471–91) suggest the earliest age of marriage is 18, but this needs further study. *Ibid.*: 295, note 240.
- 211 Riccobono 1950. Rowlandson (1998: 175–177) translated *BGU* V 1210 (Theadelphia, AD 149), which includes 115 clauses, but she also mentions an earlier version of the *Gnomon* with fewer clauses preserved in *P. Oxy* XLII 3014 (Oxyrhynchos, 1st century AD).
- 212 Yiftach-Firanko 2003: 42–54.
- 213 The practice of brother–sister marriage is attested in Egypt from the Pharaonic

Period from Egyptian royal tradition. However, Egyptian sources that mention such marriages become very rare during the Ptolemaic Period, only to reappear in large numbers in the Roman Period. This cannot be explained by any Greek condemnation of the practice, as marriages between half-brothers and half-sisters was also attested among Greeks. Frandsen 2009: 47–49 and 54ff. Rowlandson 1998: 104. Other literature on brother–sister marriage: Shaw 1992: 267–299; Scheidel 1994: 143–155; Huebner 2007: 21–49; Remijnsen and Clarysse 2008: 53–61; Rowlandson and Takahashi 2009: 104–109.

- 214 P. *Kron.* 52 (Tebtynis, AD 138). R102.
- 215 *Gnomon of the Idios Logos*, BGU V 1210 (Theadelphia, 2nd century AD). Clause n. 23. Tr. by Rowlandson 1998: 176. The clause adds that the penalty for siblings who marry is the confiscation of their property from the local administrator. Cf. Arjava 2014: 182 in Keenan, Manning, Yiftach-Firanko 2014.
- 216 Grubbs 2002: 123, notes 83, 84. Montevecchi 1998: 251–258. Parts I. A.5 and II. A.
- 217 See a selection of various types of divorce contracts in Rowlandson 1998: 160–162.
- 218 Pestman 1961: 21–50. Kato 2008: 120. Manning (2014: 150 in Keenan, Manning and Yiftach-Firanko 2014) presents examples of types A and B but not C.
- 219 Kato 2008: 146–147.
- 220 Rowlandson 1998: 137 remarks that the gifts become just a formality in the Ptolemaic Period, while the wife could get the money of her dowry back only if she obtained a divorce.
- 221 ‘accessories, clothes, furniture, domestic animals, grains, etc., and the value is expressed in various metals, such as copper, silver, gold, and ‘small gold (*nb hm*)’’: Kato 2008: 127.
- 222 Ibid.: 123.
- 223 Type B and C: all listed chronologically in Kato 2008: 147–148.
- 224 Interpreted as a fine, but translated as ‘food and clothing’ by Kato 2008: 133ff. See documents in Lüddeckens 1960: 134; Lüddeckens 1968: 30–31.
- 225 See Kato 2008: 122, 133.
- 226 Clarysse and Thompson 2009a: 298, table 7:25 for a list of papyri attesting to polygamous marriages among Egyptians. Cf. D.S. I 80.3, who claims that only Egyptian priests were monogamous, while all other Egyptian men could take as many wives as they wanted. On the contrary, Hdt. 92.1 says that monogamy was the rule for both Egyptians and Greeks, but this clearly contrasts with the evidence from the papyri, mentioned by Clarysse and Thompson 2009a: 298. Greek marriage contracts show a concern for faithfulness of both the spouses, while Egyptian divorce oaths only refer to women’s faithfulness. Greek marriage contracts often include clauses concerning sanctions for the unfaithfulness of both the spouses. Cf. for instance, P. *Eleph.* 1 (Elephantine, 311 BC); P. *Giss.* 2 (Krokodilopolis, 173 BC); P. *Tebt.* 104.18–21 (Tebtynis, 92 BC). In Demotic divorce oaths, only Egyptian women swore to faithfulness towards the husband, not the other way around. See the examples of oaths from Jeme (117 BC and 50 BC) in R121.
- 227 See previous note.
- 228 P. *Eleph.* 1 (Elephantine, 311 BC) = R123. *BL* II 2.52, V 27, VI 35.
- 229 Vandorpe and Waebens 2010: 416–417.
- 230 Rowlandson 1998: 163, 167.
- 231 For instance, in Ptolemaic Pathyris (Upper Egypt), the Hellenised Egyptian Apollonia alias Senmouthis, married the Greek cavalryman Dryton to achieve full Greek status. However, their children and grandchildren did not follow this tradition and married according to the Egyptian law: Vandorpe 2014: 103–104 in Keenan, Manning and Yiftach-Firanko 2014.
- 232 Yiftach-Firanko 2003: 181–182.

- 233 Greek dowry: Yiftach-Firanko 2003: 181–182. Cf. the dowry in Demotic contracts: Kato 2008: 127. R191; R252.
- 234 Ibid.
- 235 LSJ, P. *Oxy.* VI 905 (AD 170).
- 236 LSJ, P. *Tebt.* II 351, 1 (Tebtynis, 2nd century AD); P. Ryl II 155, 20 (Soknopaiou Nesos, AD 138–161).
- 237 Rowlandson 1998: 156.
- 238 P. *Tor. Botti* 16 (Jeme, 114 BC). Tr. in R120 based on Pestman 1961: 72–77.
- 239 Two examples of divorce oaths are: O. *Tempeleide* 1 = Paris, Louvre E 8112 (Jeme, 118–117 BC), and O. *Tempeleide* 6 = London, British Museum EA 18733 (Jeme, 50 BC). R121: tr. by Kaplony-Heckel 1963.
- 240 Pestman 1961: 56.
- 241 Rowlandson 1998: 162.
- 242 LSJ, *PSI* 36 a, 16 (Oxyrhynchos, AD 11–13).
- 243 LSJ, P. *Ryl.* II 154, 29 (Bakchias, AD 66).
- 244 Yiftach-Firanko 2003: 214.
- 245 P. *Oxy.* L 3581 (Oxyrhynchos, 4th–5th century AD) = R154.
- 246 Cases discussed by Arnaoutoglou 1995: 11–28.
- 247 Greek marriage contracts often include clauses concerning sanctions for the unfaithfulness of both the spouses (for instance in P. *Eleph.* 1 (Elephantine 311 BC); P. *Giss.* 2 (Krokodilopolis 173 BC); P. *Tebt.* I 104.18–21 (Tebtynis, 92 BC).
- 248 *BGU* VIII 1848 (Herakleopolite nome, 48–46 BC) = R128.
- 249 P. *Oxy.* II 282 (Oxyrhynchos, AD 37) = R88. BL III 130; VIII 234; P. *Heid.* III 237 (Theadelphia, 3rd century AD) = R137. BL V 43, IX 103.
- 250 Yiftach-Firanko 2003: 222. Death clauses seem to have been included in Greek marriage contracts from the 3rd century BC and survived until the Roman Period (the latest documents are from Oxyrhynchos and date to the end of the 2nd century AD).
- 251 Yiftach-Firanko 2003: 226–229, 257–258.
- 252 Ibid.
- 253 Philon of Byzantium claims that the loyalty of mercenaries is obtained by the Ptolemies only by taking care of women and children left behind because of the wars (*Philonis Mechanica libri quartus et quintus*, ed. R. Schoene Berlin 1893: 5.94.21–22, 26–29; quoted by Pomeroy 1984: 112).
- 254 See Rowlandson 1998: 90 and her example of Latin birth registration of a Roman citizen in C. *Pap. Lat.* 156 (Alexandria, 148 AD).
- 255 *ChLA* IV 249 (Philadelphia, second half of 2nd century AD) = R136.
- 256 Rowlandson 1988: 181–182. Grubbs 2002: 126ff.
- 257 ‘The existence of this ban is nowhere attested in its original form, only allusions survive in the literary works of Greek and Roman authors (especially Cassius Dio, Herodianus and Libanius), in the juridical papyri from 2nd century AD Egypt (e.g. the *Cattaoui* papyrus), and in military diplomas: Vanderpe and Waebens 2010: 426.
- 258 See transcription and photo of a well-preserved diploma from Misenum, in Keenan 2014: 126–128 in Keenan, Manning and Yiftach-Firanko 2014.
- 259 Phang 2001: 306–313.
- 260 Vanderpe and Waebens 2010: 427 and notes 65–68 for relevant bibliography. See also Broux, Coussement, and Depauw 2010.
- 261 *Gnomon of the Idios Logos* n. 34: Phang 2001: 217–221. Cf. Ulpianus, *Digest* 29, 1, 1.
- 262 The conditions of the marriage ban changed many times during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. The authority of the ban declined in the 3rd century AD, until Septimius Severus officially removed it. Vanderpe and Waebens 2010: 430–431.
- 263 P. *Brit.Mus. Andrews* 1 (Thebes, Dec. 265–Jan. 264 BC) is a rare case of a Demotic will from Upper Egypt where a woman called Eschonsis leaves her three houses and

her duties as χοαχύτης (funerary priestess) to her two sons Patemis and Panas. In exchange, she makes them swear that they will maintain her with food and garments until she dies, and they will take care of her embalming and burial.

- 264 Hobson 1983; Pomeroy 1984; Rowlandson 1998: 156.
- 265 Pomeroy 1984: 149–151.
- 266 *P. Pt.* I 9726, 9727, 9764.
- 267 Pomeroy 1984: 152.
- 268 Pomeroy 1984: 152; cf. *P. Mich.* III 182 (Philadelphia, 182 BC). R164.
- 269 Pomeroy 1984: 157–158. Rowlandson 1998: 218–219. See for example R163, 165–166.
- 270 *SB* VIII 9790 (Herakleopolite nome, mid 1st century BC); R167.
- 271 Letters dealing with women's land ownership and management: *P. Mich.* VIII 464, *P. Fay.* 127, *P. Mich.* III 221, *P. Col.* VIII 212, *P. Mich.* III 221, *P. Hamb.* I 86, *P. Ryl.* II 243, *BGU* VII 1675, *P. Oxy.* XIV 1758, *P. Oxy.* XXXIII 2680. Bagnall and Cribiore 2008: 70.
- 272 Letters dealing with women's money ownership and lending: *P. Charite* 38, *P. Oxy.* X 1295, *P. Oxy.* XIV 1773. Bagnall and Cribiore 2008: 70.
- 273 Letters dealing with the trading of goods such as jewellery, foods and everyday items: *PSI* IX 1082, *P. Oxy.* XIV 1679, *P. Oxy.* XXXI 2593, *PSI* XIV 1918, *P. Oxy.* XXXI 2599, *PSI* IX 1080, *SB* XVI 12326; *P. Yale* I 77; *SB* XIV 12024; *P. Mich.* III 221, *P. Oxy.* I 114, *P. Oslo* II 52, *P. Stras.* IV 173, *SB* V 7743. Bagnall and Cribiore 2008: 71.
- 274 *SB* XIV 11585 (Philadelphia, AD 59) = R259.
- 275 *P. Oxy.* XXXVI 2789, *BGU* XVI 2618; Bagnall and Cribiore 2008: 81.
- 276 *P. Oxy.* XIV 1758; *PSI* I 95; *P. Oxy.* VI 932.
- 277 *P. Oxy.* XXXIII 2680. Tr. by Bagnall and Cribiore 2008: 80.
- 278 *BGU* II 601; *BGU* II 602; *P. Giss.* 97; *BGU* III 827.
- 279 *P. Fay.* 91 (Euhemeria, AD 99) = R169.
- 280 *P. Col.* VII 176 (Karanis, AD 325) = R178.
- 281 Pomeroy 1984: 113–114.
- 282 *P. Oxy.* VI 899 (Oxyrhynchos, AD 200) = R149. *BL* I 328, III 133, IV 60, VI 99, VII 132, VIII 238.
- 283 Clarysse and Thompson 2009a: 303.
- 284 See for example *BGU* II 405 (Philadelphia, AD 348) = R194. *BL* I 44, II.2, 17.
- 285 Pomeroy 1984: 130.
- 286 *PSI* IV 406 (Philadelphia, 260–258 BC); Pomeroy 1984: 130. R207.
- 287 *P. Cair. Zen.* I 59003 (Birta, Transjordan, 259 BC) = R124.
- 288 *P. Kellis* 8 (Mothite Nome, Dakleh oasis, AD 362) = R212 . . .
- 289 *BGU* I 326 (Karanis, AD 189–194).
- 290 Pomeroy 1984: 131.
- 291 Pomeroy 1984: 131.
- 292 *P. Oxy.* XXXVIII 2843 (Oxyrhynchos, AD 86) = R134. *BL* VII 153, VIII 262.
- 293 Rowlandson 1998: 175.
- 294 Cf. *P. Oxy.* XXXVIII 2857 (Oxyrhynchos, AD 17 May 134) A father (freedman) leaves everything to his wife and she has a certain time to accept the inheritance, otherwise it goes to her son. The other potential heirs are explicitly excluded from the will: Clarysse 2014: 212 in Keenan, Manning, Yiftach-Firanko 2014.
- 295 *SB* VIII 9642 (1) (Tebtynis, AD 112) = R147. *BL* VII 213–214, VII 353.

2 The role of midwives in Dynastic and Greco-Roman Egypt

Midwives are essential figures to consider in a study of women's bodies and reproduction, because they were women working exclusively for other women, and dealing closely with medical, religious and legal matters that concerned women's bodies. Midwifery is also an important indicator of cultural change between the Dynastic and Roman Periods.

Midwives had a medical but also a legal role in Greco-Roman Egypt, because they examined the body of women in legal disputes. At the same time, traditionally, ancient Egyptian midwives were not just women with medical skills but also performed magical rituals in order to aid birth and safeguard the health of mother and child. Here I will trace the history of ancient Egyptian midwives back to the Dynastic Period, showing how medical practice evolved and which traditional medical, ritual and religious aspects might have survived into the Greco-Roman Period.

2.1 Midwives in the Dynastic Period

For Dynastic Egypt, there is little evidence for the activity of midwives, and female doctors in general. The earliest attestation of female doctors comes from the Old Kingdom (2649–2130 BC) (OK) mastaba of Akhethotep in Giza,¹ where he dedicated a stela to his mother Peseshet.² The stela describes her using different titles, the most interesting is the one meaning '(female) overseer of the female doctor physicians'.³ If we accept this translation,⁴ Peseshet seems to have been an overseer of a team of female doctors, and it is very likely that she was a doctor herself. Peseshet is given other titles,⁵ such as 'funerary priestess'⁶ and 'overseer of the funerary priestesses'.⁷ These suggest that not only did she have a religious role, but she also supervised funerary rituals. The traditional role of the Egyptian doctor (*swmw*) included both the giving of medicine for living patients but also mummification, so it should not be surprising that Peseshet supervised both physicians and funerary priests. What remains uncertain is whether this group of priestess-physicians, supervised by Peseshet, practised midwifery as well.

It is tempting to argue that Peseshet's name suggests so, because it recalls the *psš.kf*, the name of the knife used in the OK to cut the umbilical cord (Figure 2.1).⁸ In fact, as Roth shows, *kf* is the material of the knife but *psš*, which means



Figure 2.1 Psš.kf knife, possibly used for the cut of the umbilical cord until the Old Kingdom. Flint. Predynastic Period 3500–3100 BC. from Egypt.

‘dividing’, indicates the function of the object.⁹ The name of this woman *psš.t* would then mean ‘the divider’, ‘the cutter’, which not only seems to be more a professional name rather than a personal name, but it could also link her to the practice of midwifery, and in particular to the cutting of the umbilical cord.

The cutting of the cord was an important symbolic moment because it made the child independent from its mother, and from its own placenta.¹⁰ Therefore, ancient Egyptians believed that the fate of every child was decided at this point. In ancient Near Eastern tradition, it was important that the midwife who cut the cord said only positive sentences: negative ones could bring misfortune to the newborn. This is clear in this Sumerian text where the goddess Nungal says:

... I know the good word for cutting the cord by a reed, decreeing the fate.¹¹

Two attestations from the Dynastic Period suggest that dancing was associated with childbirth and midwifery. In the Sixth Dynasty tomb chapel of princess Watetkhethor,¹² a group of female dancers were represented performing an acrobatic dance in front of the deceased. The text that surrounds the dancers, in the five surviving registers, is probably the song that accompanied the dance. The text defines the dance as *hnrt*,¹³ and that it is closely related to childbirth:

See the pot, remove what is in it!
See, the secret of the *hnrt*,

Oh Four! Come! Pull!,
 It is today! hurry! hurry!
 See . . . is the abomination of birth.¹⁴

The first sentence is mentioning a pot that needs to be emptied. In this context, it is clear that the pot indicates the uterus, which needs to contract to deliver the child. The metaphor of the uterus as a pot seems to be a well-known one in Ancient Egypt:¹⁵ the hieroglyph for uterus was indeed a vase full of water followed by a bicornate bovine uterus. In addition, many children in the Dynastic and the Greco-Roman Period were buried in pots and amphorae,¹⁶ signifying a symbolic return to the womb. There is also a link between vases and foetal development in the myth of children's creation, because children were believed to be created by the god Khnum on a potter's wheel.

In the second sentence of the text, the dance *hnrt* is said to have a secret that contributes to childbirth: perhaps the movements of this dance were mimicking the contractions, or simply aiding them magically. The four bricks of birth, identified with the goddess of childbirth Meskhenet, were also said to magically assist in childbirth.

This link between childbirth and dance appears again in the Westcar Papyrus,¹⁷ a hieratic example probably dating to the 20th century BC,¹⁸ but narrating events that had allegedly happened during the 4th Dynasty. This papyrus describes one of the few stories about childbirth surviving from Ancient Egypt. The protagonist is a woman called Ruddjedet who is going to give birth to three future pharaohs, but her labour is very difficult. The gods know about the importance of this birth and decide to send the goddesses Isis, Nephtys, Heqet and Meskhenet and the god Khnum to help the birth. The goddesses present themselves to Ruddjedet's husband as a group of dancers whose attributes are *menit* and *sistra*. They might have been disguised as dancers to hide their real identity but, considering the example of the *hnrt* dance, their use of music and dance could have also been a complementary aspect of their activity as midwives.

Before the birth starts, the midwives lock the door of the birth room, leaving out the males: the husband of Ruddjedet and possibly the god Khnum:¹⁹



htm.nsn ʿt

They locked the birth room

Thus, in this case, the birth place was a room and not an open space, and that its door had a lock. A helpful comparison for the midwives' practice of locking the door of the birth room might come from some Hittite birth rituals. Beckman has grouped and translated into English several Hittite texts about childbirth, dated to the 13th–14th century BC,²⁰ which were found at different Anatolian sites. In text H, a ritual text found in Bogazköy, the family of a woman in labour hired a priestess called *patili*, who had to prepare the birth room ritually: the room was sealed with some pegs on each side of the door,²¹ and some protective objects were left

hanging from the pegs. These pegs can also be found in the description of a baby's delivery in Old Babylonian texts: Stol calls them 'commemorative pegs',²² while Beckman more convincingly interpreted the Hittite ones as supports for hanging 'apotropaic devices warding off evil'.²³ After the birth, the *patili*-priestess unsealed the door and made sacrifices in the crossroads.

If we consider the Hittite birth rituals as a parallel for Ruddjedet's story, we could argue that the door of the birth room was not simply locked but also closed with seals, and maybe protected with objects which were left hanging outside. However, the archaeological evidence suggests otherwise: the only preserved door seal from Egypt was found in a funerary context, in the tomb of Tutankhamon,²⁴ while no door seals for closing the doors of houses have ever been found. It is possible though that archaeologists have simply not recognised some door seals not in situ, and instead interpreted them as jar seals. Written sources are of no greater help in attesting to any ritual sealing of doors (unless the Egyptian verb 'to lock' has been misinterpreted), so overall the evidence suggests that any door sealing of the birthing room was not a common Egyptian practice.

Yet, even if we exclude any sealing, it is evident that the gesture of locking the door is not only practical but also ritual as well; this simple act leaves out Ruddjedet's husband but also all the possible supernatural threats. Ruddjedet's husband is aware of this and, despite his worries, he never steps into the birthing room during the labour.²⁵

In an NK letter from Deir el-Medina, a man seems to have been in the house while his wife was giving birth. He states:


i.iri ms.tw=k iw=i m p3 pr

it was when I was in the house that you were born.²⁶

But the man does not specify whether he was actually in the birth room or just in the house, waiting impatiently behind a locked door.

During Ruddjedet's labour, the goddess Heqet had the function of hastening the birth, the goddess Nephtys was the one who placed herself behind the parturient in order to hold her firmly, and the goddess Isis summoned the child by calling it by name. Meskhenet does not have an active role in the scene but, as happened in other royal births attested in temples, she is probably directing the other goddesses.²⁷ Royal births could have been attended by a team of midwives with different medical and ritual roles, supervised by the most experienced of them.²⁸ However, in the Westcar Papyrus Meskhenet has the important function of decreeing the fate of the children of Ruddjedet soon after their umbilical cord is cut.²⁹

Representations of the goddess Meskhenet show her important role in childbirth. She is depicted as a brick with the face of a woman, because she was believed to be the personification of the birth bricks on which women gave birth.³⁰ She was sometimes represented as a woman with a vertical headdress,³¹ identified as a cow's uterus, possibly in association with Hathor.³² In the funerary context, Meskhenet was represented as a personified brick in the scene of the 'Judgment of the Dead' in the *Book of the Dead*, while decreeing the destiny of the person in the afterlife.³³

The Westcar Papyrus gives other relevant indications about the role of midwives in Dynastic Egypt. At the beginning of the story described above, the goddesses-midwives present themselves to the husband of the parturient as women who are ‘knowledgeable in birth’;³⁴ the word ‘midwife’ means ‘wise’ or ‘knowledgeable’ woman in many languages.³⁵ In Egypt, as in other cultures, the *rh.t* ³⁶ was much more than a woman skilled in childbirth: at times she was respected, at times she was feared, and sometimes she could predict future events or explain the meaning of divine manifestations. In some ostraca from Deir el-Medina, the *rh.t* appears as a sort of seer who is taking care of the manifestations of the divine (*b3w*).³⁷ The *b3w* were closely related to the causes of diseases in Egyptian medicine: a god could either provoke the disease or come and help heal it, so, according to this, its *b3w* were either negative or positive. The *rh.t* acted as a sort of Sybil, interpreting the will of gods and giving prophecies. However, unlike the more familiar Greco-Roman Sybil, the Egyptian *rh.t* did not seem to be spiritually possessed by a god.

The ‘knowledgeable woman’ was also a healer: she was able to treat the bite of snakes and scorpions and, in all the extant sources, she is consulted for the care of sick children in particular. Both goddesses and ordinary knowledgeable women act as healers in Dynastic Egyptian sources.³⁸ For instance, in a very popular legend which circulated in Egypt in the Late Period, the goddess Isis offers her help to heal a child poisoned by a snake, by telling his mother:

I am a daughter, a knowing one in her town, who dispels a poisonous snake with her oral powers. My father has taught me knowledge.³⁹

It is worth noting in this story that Isis claims that her father had trained her: if this mirrored a practice in the NK, it is possible that children of healers were trained by their own parents.⁴⁰ However, whether she was the daughter of a doctor or not, the *rh.t* described in the myths seems to be a woman who belongs to the upper class. For instance, in a mythical episode, the young Horus falls ill and is examined by a knowledgeable woman presented as a ‘a knowing one (*rh.t*) in her town, a distinguished lady (*rfpy.t*) in her district’, who advises to ‘seek for the reason (*sp*) why this happened’, while suggesting ‘a scorpion or snake bite as the immediate cause’.⁴¹

An NK ostrakon from Deir el-Medina further attests to the association between the *rh.t* and the health of children, both in her role as healer and diviner. A man addresses a woman saying:⁴²

So why haven’t you gone to the wise woman about the two boys who died in your charge?⁴³ Consult with the wise woman about the death of the two boys:⁴⁴ was it their fate? was it their nurturing? . . .⁴⁵

Another association between wise women and the health of children is again from the Westcar Papyrus, when the goddesses define themselves as ‘knowledgeable in childbirth’. All this evidence together makes it likely that ‘knowledgeable women’ had a ritual, and probably a medical, role in childbirth as well.

Another category of women who could have assumed the function of birth ritualists is the *nbt pr*, the ‘mistress of the house’,⁴⁶ a title so common in Dynastic sources though that it is difficult to attribute to it any specific function.⁴⁷

In Dynastic Egypt wet-nurses could have been midwives as well, which may explain the scarcity of attestations of midwives and the large number of descriptions of wet-nurses in sources of this period.⁴⁸ A parallel for this may exist in the Babylonian tradition, where the priestess-midwife *qadištu* was also employed as a wet-nurse.⁴⁹ However, in Greco-Roman Egypt, midwives and hired wet-nurses were clearly two different professional figures.

2.2 Change and continuity in the Greco-Roman Period

2.2.1 *Μαῖα and ἰατρίνη*

In Greco-Roman Egypt, two names define female medical practitioners: *μαῖα* and *ἰατρίνη*. The *μαῖα* is the Greek term used for midwives,⁵⁰ while the *ἰατρίνη*⁵¹ was a female doctor who was trained to cure any kind of disease, but may have been specialised in diseases of women in particular.

While there are several attestations of the *μαῖα* and the *ἰατρίνη* in the Greco-Roman world,⁵² in Egypt there are unfortunately only two papyrological attestations of *μαῖα*⁵³ and only one of *ἰατρίνη*.⁵⁴ Representations of midwives and female doctors are also rare in Greco-Roman Egypt, the exception being a funerary stela from the Ibrahimieh Necropolis of Alexandria,⁵⁵ however, further attestations come from other parts of the Greco-Roman world.⁵⁶

The papyri that do mention the *μαῖα* both concern legal cases in the Roman Period, in which the midwife is called by a local authority to check the body of a woman. In the first case,⁵⁷ a midwife had to examine the womb of a widowed Roman citizen called Petronilla, in order to determine whether she was pregnant or not. A regular check of the pregnancy and a birth in front of witnesses would grant the newborn child the name and inheritance of its deceased father.

In the second papyrus mentioning the *μαῖα*, a midwife is called to examine the body of a woman who has been assaulted by two men in her home. In this case, the woman is not pregnant, but the victim may have chosen a *μαῖα* because she felt more comfortable to be examined by a woman.

The *μαῖα* also appears in the medical treatises of Greek doctors who had practised their profession in Alexandria since the 3rd century BC.⁵⁸ Herophilus, a follower of Hippocratic medicine, trained doctors and midwives⁵⁹ under the patronage of the first Ptolemies in the 3rd century BC.⁶⁰ He also wrote a treatise for midwives, which is not preserved,⁶¹ and greatly increased the knowledge of human anatomy, thanks to his dissection and vivisection of corpses. His ideas were followed by Galen and Soranus, even if they and many others condemned human dissection.⁶² In his partially preserved treatise about gynaecology, Soranus made an explicit statement about the characteristics of the ideal midwife, claiming that she has to be ‘free from superstition’.⁶³ This description by Soranus has been argued to be an instruction to midwives themselves, but also a guidance

for husbands to choose the right midwife for their wives.⁶⁴ However, in Egypt, Greco-Egyptian women had much greater freedom of choice in matters of medical assistance.

Private letters show that births were also performed by members of the family. In one private letter, it is a male member of the family who offers himself to perform a birth: Maximus writes to his 'sister' Tinarsieges about his intention to deliver the baby, and to bring her the objects she needs for her delivery:

Μάξιμος Τίναρσιεγέτι τῇ ἀδελφῇ πλεῖστα χαίρειν καὶ διὰ παντὸς ὑγιαίνειν·
ἐὰν ἔλθῃς εἰς τὰς ἡμέρας σου τοῦ τεκῖν, γράψον μοι εἶνα εἰσέλθω καὶ τὴν
λοχίαν σου ποιήσω, ἐπὶ οὐκ οἶδά σου τὸν μῆνα. χάριν τούτου προέγραψά
σοι, εἶνα καὶ σὺ προλάβῃς καὶ γράψῃς μοι εἶνα εἰσέλθω ἐν τῷ πλοίῳ τῶν
κιβαρίων εἶνα καὶ γὰρ μίνω ἐχόνομά σου καὶ τὴν λοχίαν μου ποιήσης. σοὶ γὰρ
προσέχω ὅτι ἐχόνομά σου μεναῶ τεκῖν. ἐὰν μὴ πέμψῃς ἐπ' ἐμὲ οὐ χάριτάν
μοι ποιεῖς. ἔμελλόν σοι πέμψαι ἀνγῖα εἰς τὴν λοχίαν σου· χάριν τούτου οὐκ
ἀπέστειλα εἶνα εἰσερχομένη ἐνέγκω καὶ δυω μάτια θερμίων . . . [ἐρρῶ]σθαί
σε εὖχομαι.

Maximos to Tinarsieges (her?) sister, many greetings and good health always.

If you are coming to your days of giving birth, write to me so that I may come and perform your delivery, since I do not know your month. I wrote to you in advance for this reason, so that you might also act in advance and write to me so that I would come in the provisions boat, so that I too may remain with you and perform your delivery. For I advise you that I am intending to give birth at your house. If you do not send word to me, you do me no favour. I was going to send you jars for your delivery. I did not send them for this reason, so that I might bring them when I come, along with two matia of lupines . . . I pray for your health.⁶⁵

The papyrologists who have studied this ostrakon, have wondered whether the author of the letter was actually a man. Thomas⁶⁶ argues that the author was a woman, probably illiterate, who asked her husband Maximus to write the letter on her behalf. He wrote the ostrakon but forgot to refer to the sender with the name of the wife. Bagnall and Cribiore⁶⁷ agree with Thomas, claiming, in addition, that the author refers to himself using a feminine participle (εἰσερχομένη, line 12). The use of the feminine participle does indeed suggest that the person was a woman, although a male midwife is not impossible. Indeed, another letter, dating to the 3rd–4th century, has a man expressing his concern for his 'sister' Theonilla:

οἶδεν γὰρ ὁ θεὸς [ς ὅ]τι ἐβουλόμην καὶ τὰ μύρα κ[αὶ τὰ ἄ]λλα πάντα τὰ πρὸς
τὴν χρίαν τῶν λοχίων ἀποστῆλαι ἀλλ' ἵνα . . γος[.]. μος τις π[ά]λ[ι]ν γένηται
οἷπ' οὐδενὸς ὧν σοι οἶδας ἐπέσχομ[αι].

God knows that I wanted to send the myrrh-ointment and all the other things for use in her delivery, but . . . I have been detained by someone you do not know.⁶⁸

A man also show his concern for a delivery in another letter, by mentioning the male doctor who is going to perform it:

ἐπισκέψαι τὴν μητέρα μ[ου] καὶ τὴν οἰκίαν καὶ τ[ὸν] ἰατρὸν καὶ λοχιάδα.

Watch over my mother and the house and the doctor and the delivery.⁶⁹

In this translation, Hanson reads λόγια (‘delivery’) instead of λοχιάδα, and translates it as the neuter plural of the adjective λόγιος with the meaning of delivery (or delivery-related things).⁷⁰ Husson provides a different translation, reading it as λοχιάδα, an accusative singular of the feminine noun λοχιάς.⁷¹ This interpretation of the term could indicate a midwife flanking a male doctor.

Two of the previously mentioned papyri also mention some objects used during the delivery, brought by relatives or by the midwife that took care of the parturient. In *O.Florida* 14, 1–12, Maximus wants to bring wine and two measures of lupines. It is difficult to say what the lupines were for, but the wine could have been used as an anaesthetic for the labour,⁷² for libations during and after childbirth, or perhaps for the child’s first bath.⁷³ In *PSI VIII* 895, 11–12 one of the ingredients is myrrh oil. Oil was probably warmed up and used to relieve the parturient mother’s pangs, as indicated, for example, by Soranus.⁷⁴ The other objects that were used for the delivery must have been similar to the ones listed by Soranus in different parts of his treatise: warm water with vapour baths, sponges, wool and bandages.⁷⁵

The most important object used for delivery was the support for the parturient. The next section will show the main physical supports used in Dynastic and Greco-Roman Egypt.

2.2.2 *Birth bricks, birth stools and birth beds*

Birth bricks were used by ancient Egyptian women as a support when giving birth. They are mentioned in spells for accelerating birth and in Egyptian literature, where they were associated with the pain of labour. For instance, the draughtsman Neferhabu, on a stela he dedicated to thank the snake-goddess Meretseger for forgiving him, after having punished him with a snakebite, it says:

I did the transgression against the Peak, and she taught a lesson to me. I was in her hand by night as by day, I sat on bricks like the woman in labour.⁷⁶

Actual birth bricks are rarely preserved, although a beautifully decorated brick from Abydos does survive.⁷⁷

From the Middle Kingdom (2030–1650 BC) (MK) onwards, birth bricks were replaced by the more comfortable birth stools, which must have come from the Near East.⁷⁸ Stol claims that the Hittite birth stool, called the *harnau*, is the earliest ever written attestation of a birth stool. ‘This stool consisted of a “bowl” in which the woman sat, two pegs which the woman grasped during her delivery, and possibly several boards placed under the bowl. It was purified before being used and it was a bad omen if it turned out to be defective when employed.’⁷⁹

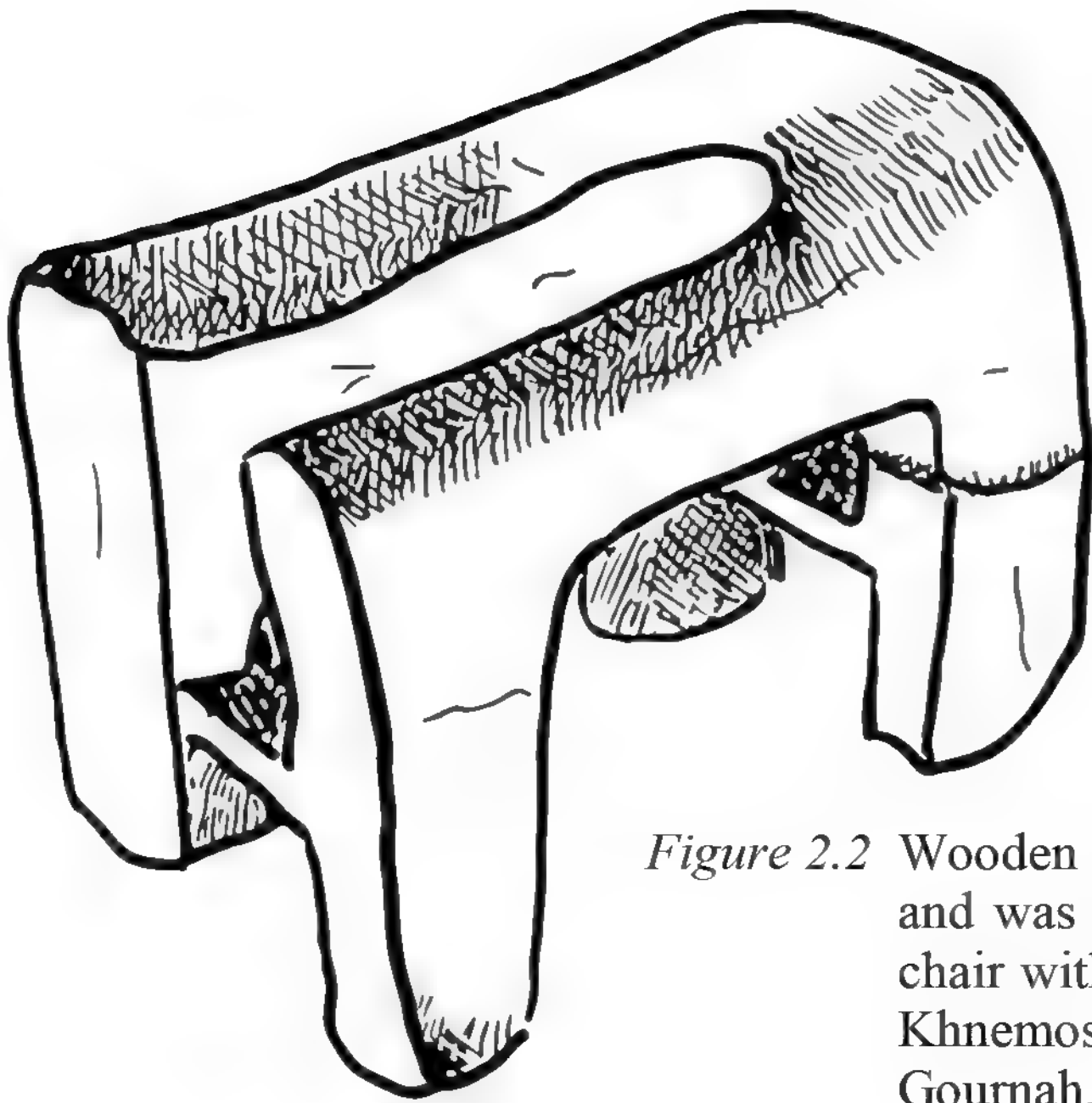


Figure 2.2 Wooden birth stool. This stool was portable and was used as alternative to the big delivery chair with armlets. From the tomb of the scribe Khnemose. 18th dynasty (1500 BC). From Gournah, Egypt.

Before the birth, the *harnau* was purified with rituals, and, according to some texts, itself received offerings, as a sort of aniconic deity. If the stool broke during labour, it was no longer considered ritually clean, and the mother was forced to give birth in another place, outside her home.⁸⁰ The only preserved birth stool is from the tomb of a scribe (Figure 2.2).⁸¹

It is possible that the birth stool was not the only physical support offered to women in labour. Toivari-Viitala has noted that some beds mentioned in documents from Deir el-Medina were ordered by women, or for women specifically. An ostracon from there lists the bed among a group of objects related to childbirth:

Purchases including the following items: one birth amulet (*s3w msw*), 2 bundles of vegetables (*smw*), one large basket (*kbs*), one (?) sieve (*mtrh*), one wooden woman's bed (*ht h'ti st*), one decorated woman's bed (*h'ti st sš*), and a(nother) birth amulet.⁸²

Another ostracon from Deir el-Medina mentions the carving of a woman's bed, *t3 mtny n p3 h'ti st*, which is bought by a certain *P3-nb*.⁸³

Toivari-Viitala argues that these special beds attested in Deir el-Medina could have been built in a different way from ordinary beds. As they were only used for a short time, during labour or the post-partum, they were no longer needed afterwards. As such the beds were 'dismantled and stored in a small space'. Indeed ceremonial beds, like Tutankhamon's, could be easily dismantled into four parts.⁸⁴

In the Greco-Roman Period, the birth stool is attested in papyri, medical texts and religious iconography. In a 2nd century AD marriage contract from Oxyrhynchos,⁸⁵ the birth stool appears in the list of goods as γυναικεῖος δίφρος. In medical treatises the stool is also called μαιωτικός or μαιευτικός δίφρος.⁸⁶ Soranus describes its manufacture and use in his handbook of gynaecology.⁸⁷ In the same passage, Soranus says that it has to be comfortable, and needs to have a

crescent-shaped cavity large enough for corpulent women. Indeed, robust women could not give birth comfortably if the cavity was too narrow, while for small women it was possible to narrow the cavity with pieces of cloth.

The δίφορος was normally made of wood, although no examples have survived from the Greco-Roman era, but they could have been made of pottery as well. Another possible candidate for the birth stool could have been the common potty, used as a night stool by adults and children. Something similar was recommended by the Hippocratics as a night stool for the expulsion of the placenta, and was called λάσανον and λάσανα in the neuter plural.⁸⁸

Two later sources also mention this stool. Artemidorus Daldianus, calls the birth stool δίφορος λοχεῖος, ‘the birthing chair’ in book five of his *Oneirocriticon*,⁸⁹ and Mark the Deacon describes the scene of Eudoxia giving birth ‘on a golden couch’.⁹⁰ The translation of ‘golden couch’ is not accurate though, as the original Greek word given is λοχηφόρος δίφορος, that is the ‘the chair that brings the birth/makes the birth happen’.

There are also some artistic depictions of women sitting on the birth stool. A relief from the temple of Kom Ombo represents goddesses sitting on the birth stool. The drawing is symbolic though, and the elements of the stool are represented schematically. Another representation is from a painted wooden mummy tablet, which was found in the 2nd century AD tomb of a girl in Hawara (Figure 2.3).⁹¹ In the painting, the woman is sitting in the position of childbirth, but the chair is barely represented, and she keeps her hands on her knees rather than on the armlets of a chair.

A terracotta statuette from the British Museum (Figure 2.4)⁹² represents a woman with a hooded mantle also sitting on a birth chair. Her arms are not preserved, so we cannot tell whether they were supported by armlets or the woman’s knees. Both this terracotta and the image on the mummy tablet may be linked to the cult of Baubo/Anasyrmene.⁹³

The most realistic representations of birth stools in the Greco-Roman Period are on magical gems: two gems show clearly a stool with armlets supporting the arms.⁹⁴

The representations then show two different kinds of stool: a small stool without armlets (Figure 2.3) similar to the Dynastic stool (Figure 2.2) or a larger one with armlets (Figure 2.5). The smaller example was probably more common because it was easy to make, carry and store. When women could not support themselves using armlets, they put their hands on their knees, or likely had their arms held by a midwife positioned behind them.

Difficult births could involve different physical supports for the woman, and more complex techniques.⁹⁵ Equally though, some women could give birth simply by sitting on the lap of a robust woman, or by kneeling or squatting on the ground, with a birth attendant receiving the baby and another holding the woman’s arms from behind.⁹⁶

Hippocratic treatises mention the use of a bed for women suffering from uterine prolapse, in order to practise succussion on the body.⁹⁷ Soranus describes the use of beds when women were too weak to stay on the stool. Interestingly, he distinguished between two kinds of bed:



Figure 2.3 Painted mummy tablet found in a girl's tomb near her coffin. This side of the tablet represents a naked woman sitting on a birth stool. Roman Period 1st – 2nd century AD. From Hawara, Egypt.



Figure 2.4 Terracotta of veiled woman sitting on a birth stool. The terracotta is flat on its back and has a hole which was possibly used to hang it on the house wall. 1st century BC. From Egypt.

one made up softly for rest after delivery and the other hard for lying down during delivery, lest on a worn-out bed <the loins give away with the sagging of the bed> . . . <and one must make the woman lie down> on her back, the feet drawn together, the thighs separated, while something is placed under the hips, so that the vagina inclines downwards.⁹⁸

A bed used for labour may be listed in a Byzantine inventory, which mentions the use of a λοχίδιον.⁹⁹ The object listed before the λοχίδιον is a φουλβῖνον, which has been interpreted as πουλβῖνον, a Greek transcription of *pulvinus*, or pillow. The λοχίδιον could be a bed used for labour,¹⁰⁰ or just a birth stool made more comfortable by a pillow.¹⁰¹ It is difficult to provide an interpretation based on the presence of the pillow because other sources mention this pillow both in association with the bed¹⁰² and the birth stool.¹⁰³



Figure 2.5 Detail from red jasper *ouroboros* showing woman giving birth on a birth stool with armlets. 3rd century AD. From Egypt.

Despite the evolution of new delivery methods, new medical instruments, such as the *speculum*,¹⁰⁴ and the introduction of various physical supports for childbirth, birth bricks did not disappear from Egyptian culture. They continued to be used in magic and funerary rituals¹⁰⁵ until the Byzantine Period and beyond.¹⁰⁶

2.2.3 *New aspects of midwifery in Greco-Roman Egypt*

The image of the goddess-midwife Meskhenet survived in Greco-Egyptian temples,¹⁰⁷ both as a personification of birth bricks but also as a goddess of fate. From the Ptolemaic Period the goddess was multiplied into four Meskhenets, who decreed the fate of the divine child with benevolent words.¹⁰⁸ The association between midwifery and fate was well understood by the new rulers of Egypt, because this concept was also present in Greek and Roman culture.¹⁰⁹ In Greece, the goddess-midwife Eileithyia was in the birth room, together with the Moirai, who had the task of deciding the fate of the child.¹¹⁰ In the *Iliad* (19.74), Eileithyia is multiplied into various ‘Eileithyiai’. These goddesses had the power to determine the fate of a child because they could ensure a successful delivery, but could also cause the mother to fatally retain the child in the womb.¹¹¹

The multiplication of Eileithyia is therefore strikingly paralleled in Ptolemaic Egypt, where all the birth goddesses also appear either as one or multiplied. The Meskhenets were four like the birth bricks,¹¹² and the Hathors were seven, like the number of ritual knots that needed to be tied to protect a pregnancy (and untied to let the labour happen).¹¹³ The number of Greek Eileithyiai is not specified in Homer’s poem, but 6th century BC Attic vases show two Eileithyiai helping Zeus to deliver Athena from his head.¹¹⁴

Roman culture also saw a connection between midwife-goddesses and Fates.¹¹⁵ The Roman counterpart of Eileithyia was the goddess-midwife Lucina,¹¹⁶ who

was sometimes identified with Juno but was never multiplied. However, Varo and Tertullian list various gods and goddesses that protected each phase of pregnancy, birth, and postpartum;¹¹⁷ the iconography on tombs and gems suggests that the postpartum was also assisted by a group of women, represented as Fates. A group of Roman imperial gems shows the three Fates depicted in the moment before they decided the fate of the child by raising it from the ground.¹¹⁸ In two 2nd century AD marble sarcophagi,¹¹⁹ the Fates were represented while decreeing the fate of the child on a sphere during the child's first bath, which was considered very important because it purified the child and incorporated it into its family.

Unlike Meskhenet, the Dynastic 'knowledgeable woman' seems to have disappeared in the Greco-Roman Period. Indeed in Greco-Roman sources, the title of 'knowledgeable woman' was no longer attributed to ordinary women, although it did survive as a title for Isis and Nephtys in temples.¹²⁰ Therefore, in this period, midwifery is still related to Isis and probably to her priestesses, but what do we know about priestly midwifery in the Greco-Roman Period? Did it mainly follow the Greek or the Egyptian medical tradition? Did priests (and priestesses) actually perform midwifery, or did they just write about it as a literary subject?

The topic of medical traditions is still subject of discussion, and so deserves a more detailed answer. From the beginning of the Ptolemaic domination, Greek medical practitioners who worked in Alexandria and in the main Greek *poleis* treated and trained members of the Greek-speaking dominant class. After a time, the social and cultural division between Greeks and Egyptians became much more nuanced, due to mixed marriages and the Hellenisation of the native population. Therefore, we cannot talk about 'Greek medicine' for the Greeks and 'Egyptian medicine' for the Egyptians after the first century of the Ptolemaic era. However, even though many Egyptians became Hellenised, the Greek medical tradition did not replace Demotic medical texts, which were still being written in temples in the Roman Period. It may be that Greek medical tradition was stronger among Roman citizens and people with Greek status in the Hellenised cities, while the Egyptian tradition had more followers among the *Aigyptioi* of the rural areas, especially in Upper Egypt. Yet, new studies and papyrological finds are showing that the picture is more complicated than this.

First of all, people with Greek status living in the *poleis* travelled, had second homes in the countryside and brought their medical traditions with them. Furthermore, the existence of temple libraries that preserved both Greek and Egyptian medical texts suggest that they were not seen as incompatible, and could be used by the same practitioners. Indeed, both Egyptian and Greek texts combine empirical medical practice with other non-medical disciplines, such as magic and astrology.

Priestly medicine survived in Egyptian temples until the Byzantine Period,¹²¹ and treated patients from all social classes by using spells, and incubation in special annexes of temples.¹²² Literate people with strong religious beliefs may have known that the cause of their disease was not supernatural, but they might still have considered the intervention of a god as more powerful than any medical cure. As a consequence, incubation practices, oracles and domestic religious

rituals were very common in Egyptian cities and villages. However, the large corpora of Greek and Demotic medical papyri found in temples does suggest that priests had an interest in more scientific practices as well.

Two Roman temples, to Soknobkonneus in Tebtynis, and to Suchos in Crocodilopolis, have given us precious examples of the sorts of Greco-Egyptian texts that were written or copied by priests between the 1st and the 3rd century AD.¹²³ Medical texts were kept in the temple's library, traditionally called the 'House of Life', and the presence of both Greek and Demotic texts also confirms that priests were interested in both the Greek and Egyptian medical tradition. Hanson argued that the priests of Tebtynis only came into contact with Greek medical literature accidentally, through a group of wealthy Hellenised people who lived in the *polis* of Antinoupolis.¹²⁴ These people presumably had their second homes in Tebtynis, and brought their Greek literary and medical texts with them to these homes. This argument that the Greek texts came from elsewhere rather than being produced first-hand in Tebtynis might seem plausible at first as most of the medical texts found in the temple library were in Demotic rather than Greek.¹²⁵ The nearby villages of Karanis and Soknopaiou Nesos do not have the same amount of Greek medical texts, thus suggesting that Tebtynis was an exceptional case. However, an exclusive presence or at least a prevalence of Demotic texts does not mean necessarily that any contact with Greek medical sources was either absent or accidental. Indeed the presence of Greek loanwords in Demotic medical texts from Fayum shows that priests read and translated Greek texts.¹²⁶ Furthermore, it seems unlikely that Egyptian priests only read Greek medical texts for their own personal interest without putting this new knowledge into practice. Indeed, some of the Greek medical papyri were copied on lower-value reused papyri, probably because the priests wanted to have a personal copy for their own or professional use.¹²⁷ Thus, in spite of the fact that Egyptian priests (and priestesses) mainly wrote in Demotic, they still welcomed any contact and exchange with the Greek tradition.

So far, I have discussed priestly medical practice in a general way but, in order to discuss midwifery in relation to priestly medicine, we need to look more closely at the few examples of Demotic and Greek gynaecological and obstetrical papyri from temple libraries.

A Demotic papyrus from the temple of Crocodilopolis¹²⁸ has a list of diagnoses of ailments as well as prognoses. The medical ingredients listed in this papyrus can be found in Egyptian medical papyri and Greek treatises. This again suggests that the author of the text studied now lost Greek documents but still chose to write in Demotic.¹²⁹ The papyrus does not mention childbirth,¹³⁰ but does give prescriptions for women's diseases,¹³¹ and for a mysterious ailment (*hrpyt*) which affected newborn babies.¹³²

Prescription for the *hrpyt*, ailment of the baby, it being to be triturated finely; to be applied to it.¹³³

Some of the few Greek medical writings from the library of the temple at Tebtynis¹³⁴ are medical-astrological texts, where the pathologies are associated

with the movement of planets. A 2nd-century AD fragment is particularly interesting for us here, because it links a pregnant women's miscarriage to the movements of the planet Venus.¹³⁵ This papyrus also mentions the embryotomy, a practice which was still performed in the Roman Period, but became controversial in the Byzantine era.¹³⁶

Despite this interest in childbirth by Egyptian priests, it is impossible to tell whether midwifery was actually practised in the annexes of Roman Egyptian temples or whether instead the priests acted as ritualists or practitioners in private houses. Some kind of medical practice or medical training was probably carried out by the temple, as suggested by a group of medical instruments and amulets found in the temple at Tebtynis,¹³⁷ similar to those represented in the reliefs in the temple of Sobek and Haroeris in Kom Ombo. The association between advanced medical instruments and amulets in these representations at Kom Ombo, shows once again how magic and advanced medical practice were seen as complementary. The amulets found in Tebtynis and the ones represented in Kom Ombo, are the traditional amulets of health, Bes and the Udjat eye. These traditional amulets were flanked by more specific medical amulets which became widespread in the Roman Period, some of which were used specifically for pregnant women. These were the *ouroboroi*, that regulated the timely opening of the womb, and the *okytokia*, used to accelerate the birth.¹³⁸

2.3 Preliminary conclusions

This chapter shows that the figure of the midwife in Ancient Egypt is very complex to study. One of the main difficulties for the Dynastic Period is to find attestations of midwives in religious literature and private letters: midwives are very elusive from this time. However, this almost complete invisibility does not seem to correspond to a low status; the few attestations of Dynastic midwives in religious texts equate them to powerful and independent goddesses. The figure of the 'knowledgeable woman' seems to be very much respected.

In the Greco-Roman Period, midwives and female doctors receive the same Greek names (*μαῖα* and *ιατρίνη*) that they have in other parts of the Greco-Roman world. From the Ptolemaic Period, some women had the opportunity to receive training in urban medical schools, and became respected figures whose opinion was looked for in legal cases. The Greek professional titles of *μαῖα* and *ιατρίνη* do not directly translate to any known Egyptian title, thus giving the false impression that the Greco-Roman domination introduced a total break from the past in this profession.

So what did actually survive of the elusive Egyptian midwives in Greco-Roman Egypt? First of all the name of the knowledgeable goddesses and Meskhenet(s) survived in Ptolemaic and Roman temples, and the image of the birth brick remained a powerful one (the next chapter will show how the bricks were still used for several magical rituals). However, the function of Meskhenet as Fate no longer corresponded with one of the Roman Fates. The Egyptian Meskhenet decided what kind of person the child would become as an adult, the Roman

midwives Fates simply decreed whether the child would be recognised and raised by its family. Fate became more associated with family recognition and possible child exposure, concepts previously unknown (or unwelcome) in Egyptian society.

As well as the traditional images of the midwife-goddesses, temples also preserved and kept producing large corpora of Egyptian medical literature. It is likely that these texts were read and written by priests for a practical use, suggested by the medical instruments found in Tebtynis. Temple texts show that Egyptian practice was certainly enriched by the exchange with its Greek counterpart, with new sets of medical and astrological diagnoses composed in the field of gynaecology and obstetrics. Future translations of the Demotic medical texts from Tebtynis will further clarify to what extent Egyptian and Greek practice came into contact.

Finally, private letters suggest that birth mainly took place in the house, either assisted by family members or by professional doctors. The choice of one or the other probably depended on the wealth of the family and the presence of professional doctors and midwives in the area where the parturient lived. Sources do not specify whether birth ritualists were members of the family or separate professional figures, such as priests visiting the houses for the occasion. What we do know is that the existence of new Greco-Egyptian birth amulets, and the association between medical instruments and amulets, shows that birth rituals in the Greco-Roman Period continued to be as important as medicine.

Notes

- 1 Hassan 1932: 83, fig. 143. Peseshet stela: Ghalioungui 1975: fig. 1.
- 2 *psš.t* in Ranke 1935: 137.
- 3 *imy(t)-r3 swnwt*.
- 4 By Nunn 2002: 124.
- 5 Ghalioungui 1975: 163.
- 6 *hm(t) k3*.
- 7 *imy(t) r3 hm(wt) k3*.
- 8 Roth 1992: 123. The connection of this knife with midwifery had such an important meaning that this object became part of a ritual which allowed the dead to be reborn in the afterlife: 'in the Pyramid Texts, the *pss-kf* is offered to the deceased in the spell immediately before the spell for the opening of the mouth.' Ibid.: 113. Cf. reed knife: Metropolitan Museum, MM 12.6.4.
- 9 Roth 1992: 124.
- 10 The placenta was thought to be a sort of double of the child, called *k3*, and this is the reason why it was accurately preserved and buried, especially in the case of pharaohs. This importance in Egypt meant that, after its expulsion, it was not simply thrown away; sometimes it was buried under the floor of the house or was put in a jar. In the Near Eastern and Jewish tradition it was also buried or put in a jar (Stol 2000: 145). The person rejoined the *k3* only at the moment of death, which was called 'joining the *k3*' (Roth 1992: 126). Death was seen as a return to the womb, which was followed by a new, permanent rebirth in the afterlife. Therefore, Egyptians associated childbirth with rebirth after death.
- 11 Roth 1992: 143.
- 12 Roth 1992: 142, fig. 10.
- 13 For the meaning of *hnr* see Colin 2001.

- 14 Tr. Roth 1992: 141. She interpreted the ‘four’ mentioned in the song as the birth bricks, on which women traditionally squatted to give birth.
- 15 Power and Tristant 2016: 1478–1479.
- 16 See Chapter 4.
- 17 P. *Berlin* 3033. Erman 1890; Gödicke 1993; Hays 2002.
- 18 Lichtheim 1973: 215.
- 19 Papyrus *Westcar* 10, 7.
- 20 Beckman 2000 for remarks on Hittite chronology.
- 21 Beckman 1983: 99.
- 22 Stol 2000: 77.
- 23 Beckman 1983: 99.
- 24 Knot tied in 1323 BC, sealing the doors of Tutankhamon’s tomb, discovered 1922 by Howard Carter in the Valley of the Kings. New Kingdom.
- 25 P. *Westcar* 10.2. The image of the father consumed by worry and impatience, spying from behind a door, can be seen in the Eastern iconography of the nativity of the Theotocos. See, for instance, the nativity of Mary in the Kariye church, Chora Istanbul, 14th century AD.
- 26 Transcription and translation by Toivari-Viitala 2001: 173–174.
- 27 Breasted 1906: 88, nn. 216–217.
- 28 Cf. the celebratory relief at the temple of Khnum at Esna (Upper Egypt), which features a group of birth attendants assisting Cleopatra VII Philopator while she gives birth to Caesar’s son, Caesarion.
- 29 Her name was also one of the three terms designating the term ‘fate’. Zecchi 2004: 167–168; Baines 1994: 37.
- 30 Cf. Roth and Röhrig 2002: 130. Examples: book of the Dead in Turin, in Roth 1992: 130, fig. 4a. Papyrus of Ani at the British Museum.
- 31 Naville 1894: 16. Roth 1992: 145, fig. 11.
- 32 Spieser 2011: 70.
- 33 The association between birth and rebirth is also the reason why the typical instruments used by the midwife, like birth bricks and the *psš.kf* knife, also became part of the funerary equipment which assured the deceased a rebirth in the afterlife. Roth 1992; Roth and Röhrig 2002.
- 34 *mk n rh.wjn smsj*. P. *Westcar* 10, 5.
- 35 In many traditions and languages the midwife is called ‘wise woman’. Even the English word ‘midwife’ could derive from ‘wid-wife’, the ‘knowing woman’: Stol 2000: 171.
- 36 *Wb.* II, 446.3–5; LGG IV, 709.
- 37 Borghouts 1982: 1–70.
- 38 O. *Cairo CG* 25674, recto. O. *Gardiner* 149. Toivari-Viitala 2001: 228–231.
- 39 Metternich Stela, 57. Borghouts 1982: 26, 59, note 123. The Metternich Stela, on which the myth is preserved, is an inscribed Horus Cippus which had the function of protecting people [?] from the poison of venomous animals. In the myth, Isis could not find a place where to give birth. A woman refused to give her a place where to stay and, as revenge, Isis had her son poisoned by the bite of snakes. However, she then decided to heal the woman’s child.
- 40 O. *Tait*, II 1987, 2nd century AD. Hirt-Raj 2006: 34. The apprenticeship of young doctors is certainly attested in the Greco-Roman Period in a contract in which a person takes a *paidion* as a young apprentice in medicine. The doctor could have been a parent, but also someone not related to the *paidion*. Cf. Herodotus, VI, 60.1 who claimed that the Egyptians followed the occupation of their fathers.
- 41 Tr. by Borghouts 1982: 1–72; Lang 2012: 214–215, notes 37–39.
- 42 Letellier 1980. Transcription in <http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/age/agewisewoman.html>.
- 43 *y ih p3y.t tm šmt n t3 rht hr p3 ʿdd ir mwt m-di.t hn.t*.

- 44 *ndnd.t m-di.t n t3 rht hr p3 mwt ir p3 ʿdd.*
 45 *n p3y.w š3y n t3.w rnnt.*
 46 Quirke 2005: 81–84.
 47 Stefanović and Saltzinger 2015: 333–338.
 48 Lang 2012: 219.
 49 Stol 2000: 188. Stol argued that ‘the house of the tabooed woman’ could be a sort of nursery.
 50 Cf. LSJ, Gal.14.641. Sor.2.3.
 51 Cf. LSJ, J. *Vit.* 37; Gal.8.414; Alex.Aphr. *Pr.* 2.64.
 52 Gourevitch 1984; Retief 2010: 166–188.
 53 P. *Gen.* II, 103 from Arsinoite, 147 AD; P. *Oxy.* LI 3620 from Oxyrhynchos, 326 AD. Hirt-Raj 2006: 52–54.
 54 P. *Oxy.* XII, 1586, 12 (beginning of 2nd century AD).
 55 Funerary stele with a woman in childbirth. Late 4th–early 3rd century BC. From the Soldiers’ Tomb, Ibrahimieh necropolis, Alexandria, excavated in 1884. Limestone, paint. MM 04.17.1.
 56 French 1986: 76–78. Gourevitch 1984: 42–48.
 57 P.*Gen* II 103–104. This case belongs to a group of papyri that I will further discuss below in 4.4.1.
 58 Gal.14.641. Sor.2.3.
 59 Hyginus reports the story of Agnodike, a Greek woman that studied under Herophilus in Athens, and disguised herself as a man to do so, because women did not have access to medical schools. The teacher was identified with Herophilus of Calcedon, who also practised in Alexandria. Hyginus’ account, and the figure of Agnodike, will not be discussed here, but see King 1986.
 60 von Staden 1989.
 61 von Staden 1989: 296ff.
 62 Galen practised dissection on animals like apes and elephants because they he thought they were similar to humans. Gal. *De Opt. Med. Cognosc.* 9, 6. Gal. *De Anat. Admin.*, 7.10. Soranus makes an explicit statement against dissection, without specifying whether he condemns human dissection or just animal dissection. Sor. 1.5. Cf. Temkin 1991: 7, note 5.
 63 Sor. 1.4. Similarly, the ideal wet-nurse must not be superstitious: Sor. 2.88.
 64 Hanson 1994: 170, 193–195.
 65 O. *Florida* 14, 1–12, 21 (Apollinopolis Magna, 2nd century AD). Bagnall and Cribiore 2008: A8.3, Nr. 58.
 66 Thomas 1978: 142–144, n. 105.
 67 Bagnall and Cribiore 2008: A8.3, Nr. 58.
 68 SB XXII 15560 (provenance unknown, 3rd–4th century AD), 11–12. Tr. by Hanson 1994: 159. Cf. Rowlandson 1998: 221.
 69 P. *Oxy* LI 3642, 12–16.
 70 Hanson 1994: 160, note 8.
 71 Husson 1986: 91, note 9.
 72 See Pliny the Elder, who reports the folk practice of giving the parturient sow milk mixed with honey wine: HN 28.77.250.
 73 The practice of bathing the newborn with wine is strongly and openly condemned by Soranus: Sor. 8.12.
 74 Sor. 4 69. The oil here is from olives, but in Egypt olives were less common, so another oil might have been preferred. In addition, myrrh oil is beautifully perfumed and is still used today for skin care.
 75 Hanson 1994: 168.
 76 Lichtheim 1976: 108.
 77 Wegner 2006: 35.

- 78 Stol 2000: 121.
- 79 80 Beckman 1983: 111.
- 81 JE 56.353. Hanson 1994: 166–167, fig.4 and for the earlier discussion about the identification of the stool as potty or as birth stool, see *ibid.*, note 20; Rowlandson 1998: 288 n. 33.
- 82 O. *Gardiner* 9. Tr. by Toivari-Viitala 2001: 177–178, note 317 includes further references. In O. *CGC*. 25583 The items include: food, leather sandals, mats/sheets, a basket, a sieve, a rope and strings of beads: Toivari-Viitala 2001: 130.
- 83 O. *Varille* 13. *Ibid.*, 2001: note 318, she also mentions O.BM. 50737 where a woman buys a bed. However, this one seems to be a normal bed.
- 84 *Ibid.*: 178 and note 320.
- 85 P. *Oxy* ILIX 3491, 8. Husson 1986: 91.
- 86 Sor. 1.35; Orib. *Fr.* 10.9.2 (Antyllus). Husson 1986: 91, note 14.
- 87 Sor. 2.3. See the discussion of this description in Gourevitch 1984: 171–173.
- 88 λάσανον in Hp. *Superf.* 8.1–2, 76. λάσανα in Hp *Fist.* 9.2. Hanson 1994: 162–168, fig. 1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, 3. For a detailed study of the Greek potty, see Lynch and Papadopoulos 2006: 1–32.
- 89 Artemid. 5, 73.
- 90 Marc. Diac. *Vita Porphyrii* 44. Ed. Hill 1913: 49.
- 91 Fig. 3.50, 3.51.
- 92 BM 1992.0811,1.
- 93 See Chapter 3.
- 94 CBd-758 and 759.
- 95 Sor. 2.5. Soranus talks negatively about a position which must have been common in Egypt as it is still used today in rural Egypt: the woman gave birth squatting over a pit, and the midwife stood in the pit and received the baby.
- 96 Cf. hieroglyphs for birth showing women in squatting positions. Also, see the temple relief from Dendera, with a goddess giving birth on a birthing stool assisted by two cow-headed goddesses. Temple of Hathor, Dendera. Greco-Roman Period.
- 97 Hp. *Mul.* 4; Littré VIII 514–516.
- 98 Soranus 2.3 (86); Temkin 1991: 72.
- 99 P. *Oxy* X 1290, 8 (5th century AD).
- 100 Quoted by Husson 1986: 117, note 11.
- 101 Husson 1986: 117.
- 102 *Pulvinus* in P. *Mich.* VIII 468, lines 10–12 (Alexandria, 100–125 AD).
- 103 Soranus mentions the use of the pillow in association with the birth stool; when the afterbirth is retained, the infant, still attached to the mother through the umbilical cord, can be put on a pillow below the mother: Sor. 2.67.
- 104 Called διόπτρα by Sor. 3.40.1–3 and Paul.Aeg. 6.73, 78. Hanson (1994: 170) claims it was ‘used in the treatment of hemorrhage following difficult births’. See also *ibid.*, note 29, for more bibliography on archaeological and literary examples of Greco-Roman *specula*. On different shapes, for women and men, of Roman catheters and *specula*, see Baker 2013: 106.
- 105 See chapter 3.
- 106 An 11th-century AD Coptic spell from Egypt invokes the four bricks on which Mary gave birth to Jesus. Crum 1942: 69.
- 107 For example, the inscription from the Ptolemaic temple of Esna, in Marshall 2015: 122.
- 108 Spieser 2011: 71–73.
- 109 A solemn moment, but also a very risky one because if the midwife cut it too soon, the placenta would have been retained in the womb, endangering the life of the mother. In addition, soon after the cut, the midwife had the crucial task of judging the child’s chance of survival by observing its vitality and the condition of the umbilical cord.

- 110 Cf. Bettini 2013: 61–62.
- 111 For instance, they try to prevent the delivery of Alcmene's child Herakles, in *Iliad* 19.74.
- 112 Marshall 2015: 122.
- 113 Papyrus Berlin 3027, chap. V (6, 1–6). Cf. Erman 1901: 50–51 and Yamazaki 2003: 52. Spieser 2011: 78–80.
- 114 Foley 2003: 116, Cat. 5.
- 115 For a full discussion of the identification between midwives and Fates in the Roman world, see Dasen 2009 and Dasen 2015: chapter 8.
- 116 Strabo (17.1.47) reports that the city of El Kab in Upper Egypt was dedicated to the lunar goddess Nekhbet by the Egyptians, then to Eilethya under Ptolemaic Rule, and finally to Lucina under the Romans.
- 117 Varro (*Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum* in Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei contra paganos* 4, 11, 2–3): Antevorta, Prorsa et Postvorta protect the embryo while *in utero*; Lucina assists the labour; Opis picks up the child that is born; Vaticanus supervises the first cry; Levana looks after the picking up of the child. Tertullian (*Ad Nationem* 2, 11, 1–6) adds a few more deities: Consevius, Fluvionia, Vitumnus and Sentinus protect the child in the womb, while Diespater bring the child to light with the help of Candelifera. These two passages are quoted and discussed in Dasen 2015: 6501–6502 (Kindle location).
- 118 Cf. BM 3079 and Dasen 2009: fig. 2, 3.
- 119 Cf. marble panel from the side of a biographical sarcophagus. A nurse is washing a newborn baby, but all the other women are looking at the woman who is writing on the sphere, deciding the child's life course. From Rome, 160–180 AD. Los Angeles, County Museum of Art (LACMA). Image from http://www.vroma.org/images/raia_images/sarcophagus_bio.jpg. The other 2nd-century AD marble sarcophagus panel is preserved in Agrigento, in the Regional Archaeological Museum, and drawn by Dasen 2009: 203, fig. 4.
- 120 *rh.tj. Wb.* II, 446.4; LGG IV, 711.
- 121 Many of them were shut around the 4th century AD: Hirt-Raj 2006: 306–307.
- 122 For instance, the god of childbirth, Bes, had his own oracular centre in Abydos, where people came to practise incubation. However, despite Bes' link with childbirth, there are no attestations of priestess-midwives working within the temple.
- 123 P. *Vindob.* D 6257 in Demotic; P. *Tebt.* II 676 and P. *Tebt.* II 276 in Greek. These medical papyri were probably written in the House of Life (pr anx) of the two temples.
- 124 Hanson 2005: 387–402.
- 125 Cf. Ryholt 2013: 235ff.
- 126 Lang 2012: 222ff. Although she points out that the evidence of 'translation and combination of medical information' of Greek and Demotic sources is not specifically attested in Tebtynis.
- 127 Van Minnen 1998: 168.
- 128 P. *Vindob.* D 6257.
- 129 Reymond 1976: 40. Reymond comments that what can be found in this document is 'new and unparalleled in documents of earlier date'.
- 130 The comment by Montserrat 1996: 30 is incorrect.
- 131 Reymond 1976: 118–119; 187–188. Another papyrus which mentions diseases of women is P. *Berlin Dem.* 13602. Erichsen 1954: 363–377.
- 132 According to Reymond 1976: 144, the term *hrpyt* derives from *hrp/ϣορπ* 'being early' or 'being first'.
- 133 Tr. by Reymond 1976: 86. Transcription: *ibid.*: 87.
- 134 P. *Tebt.* II 276; P. *Tebt.* II 676. van Minnen (1998) and Hanson (2005) argue that these papyri do not come from the temple library, but rather were part of the priests' private

possessions, while Ryholt (2013) considers these texts might indeed be part of the library.

- 135 Greek astrological papyrus P. *Tebt.* II 676. Hanson and Flemming 2009. Cf. the contemporary treatise on medical astrology written by Ptolemy: Marganne 1981: 325, no. 173. Hanson and Flemming 2009: 184–185.
- 136 See the episode of the death of empress Eudoxia in Chapter 4.
- 137 The presence of medical instruments in the temple does I think show that medicine was practised within it, but the possibility that these instruments were offered by the priests as votive objects, after their use, cannot be ruled out. Cf. medical instruments or medical related objects deposited as votive offerings in the Roman World: Baker 2013: 50–51; 105.
- 138 For uterine gems see Chapters 3 and 4.

3 Childbirth and domestic cult in Greco-Roman Egypt

Childbirth is a moment of pain and distress, and mothers-to-be have always looked for consolation and relief at this time. Across many cultures, the most common way of invoking help in childbirth is to call upon a deity to assist in the birthing room. In antiquity, the names of the mother-goddesses were screamed during distress, and were called in rejoicing when the danger had passed.¹ However, the deity was also invited to the birthing room to provide further protection, not only to the mother and unborn, but also to the domestic space itself. It was believed that in moments of weakness, like sleep, birth and illness, evil spirits and bad manifestations of deities could come into the house and strike the body of human beings. In order to prevent these supernatural attacks, the domestic space had to become a sacred space, a temporary temple where the deity could descend safely and help the devotee. This chapter will be devoted to the study of these birth rituals in Ancient Egypt, from the Dynastic to the Greco-Roman Period. The large body of evidence for them will be divided into three groups: section 3.1 will look at some birth rituals which can be associated with the protection of the birth room. Section 3.2 will discuss and classify all the votive images of women which are associated with fertility, pregnancy and childbirth. Finally, section 3.3 will investigate the domestic cult of Bes, in relation to his function as protector of pregnant and childbearing women.

3.1 Protection of the birthing room and the domestic space

This section will examine which kinds of objects and spells were used to set up a protective space within the domestic arena.

3.1.1 Apotropaic wands

Dating back to the MK, apotropaic wands are the earliest known objects in Ancient Egypt which show a clear link with childbirth and the birthing room.² This is because they represent childbirth deities like Bes, Taweret and the frog goddess Heqet, and because they contain protective inscriptions for babies.³ These objects were made from hippopotamus tusk, probably because of their connection with Taweret, a deity represented as a hybrid between a hippo, a lion and a woman. In

the inscriptions on these wands, the deities express their intention to protect the baby. Some deities declare that the wand spell will have the power to extend their protection to the newborn:

[words said by Aha]:

I have come to extend my protection on Senauy-seseib son of Senebet-Uemet-Ankhet.⁴

We have come that we may protect this child Senebef-Osiris, alive, sound and healthy⁵

In another wand, the deities protect both the mother and the son:⁶

Recitation by the many protectors: We have come that we may extend our protection around the healthy child Minhotep, alive, sound, and healthy, born of the noblewoman Sitsobek, alive, sound, and healthy.⁷

These deities are ready to attack any trespasser of the birthing room with long sharp knives:

Cut off the head of the enemy when he enters the chamber of the children whom the lady . . . has borne.⁸

Deities with knives are represented in most of the wands, but it is unclear whether the wand itself could be used as a sort of ritual weapon. Wands often show signs of wear and tear, and some of them were repaired more than once; this could be a sign that they were used many times, but it is hard to understand in what way. It has been suggested that apotropaic wands were used to trace protective circles around babies, as happens in some parts of Africa today.⁹ One particular ancient wand's protection of the space around the child is apparent from its inscription:

We came to deploy the protection around (and) the protection behind, for Senebankh [=the child]¹⁰

The deities also declare that their spell will never leave the child exposed to dangers, as it will cast a protection 'by day' and 'by night':

[words said by these gods]:

Our protection, life, health and prosperity, the protection by night and the protection by day, around this child Nehy (son of) Peret.¹¹


Representations of these wands in a funerary context, in one case shown carried by nurses to the deceased,¹² suggests a possible association with rituals of rebirth in the afterlife as well.¹³




Figure 3.1 Apotropaic wand. Egypt. Middle Kingdom (ca. 1981–1640 BC). Hippopotamus ivory. The wand is decorated on one side with protective figures who were believed to protect mothers and children. An inscription on the front reads ‘protection of day’ and ‘protection of night’.

Apotropaic wands disappear by the end of the NK. However, magical rods and knives were still used in the Greco-Roman Period. Some Roman Period knives, produced as miniature terracottas or ivory knives, have been found in an urban context,¹⁴ but are still awaiting interpretation.

3.1.2 *Birth bricks*

Another object used to protect the space of the birthing room is the birth brick. Birth bricks were the original physical support for Ancient Egyptian women when they gave birth. From the MK onwards, birth bricks were replaced by the more comfortable birth stools, which originated from the Near East.¹⁵ However, the tradition of birth bricks continued to survive for centuries as part of Ancient Egyptian cultural heritage.¹⁶ The Coptic word used for the birthing brick, **TOBE**,¹⁷ derived from the Egyptian word for ‘brick’ *db.t* .¹⁸

Another Egyptian word for birth bricks, *mshnt* ,¹⁹ identified the bricks with the goddess Meskhenet.²⁰ An NK spell invoked Meskhenet and Nut for the protection of a mother and her unborn child, and had to be spoken over two bricks:

... it ... (?) Meskhenet

May you invigorate yourself, may you be active, Meskhenet, because you are a totality, the hand of Atum that generated Shu and Tefnut. This creator has gone away, knowing that in your name, Meskhenet, you will create the ka of this child who is in the womb of this woman. For him, I have emanated a royal order to Geb so that he creates the ka.

[...]

Nut welcomes all the god, her stars are an army of stars and as her stars they do not move away. Since their protection comes for NN. and the one that she protects, P.

These words have to be pronounced on a pair of bricks [that (?) . . . while (?) . . . on the left side and Nut on the right side is (?) . . . in . . . Geb (?) . . . Of birds, incense on fire . . . in which case the latter executes this supplication with a strip of fine decorated cloth and a standard stick is in his hand.²¹

This spell is protective, but has the unusual function of protecting an unborn. Therefore, instead of the birthing room, Meskhenet has to protect the space within the womb, and even participates in the formation of the child's *ka*. The sky goddess Nut calls for help from all the pantheon of gods, who are beautifully compared to an 'army of stars'.

The tradition of birth bricks seems to derive from the Near East, although it is hard to say in which period it was brought to Egypt. In the Atram-ḥasīs, the best preserved Old Babylonian myth, birth bricks are mentioned in the context of the creation of the first human beings:

In the house of the pregnant woman in confinement, let the brick be in place for seven days.²²

The advice to leave the brick(s) for seven days means that it was used for a longer period than the labour itself, possibly for protective rituals.

In Egypt, although there are many attestations of spells involving birth bricks, only one actual brick has been identified as such. This brick was found in the house of a wealthy mayor of Abydos, and dates to the MK.²³ Its identification was possible thanks to the decorations on the sides of the brick, which luckily preserve traces of colour as well. One side represents a mother holding a child, assisted by two women with blue hair.²⁴ The whole scene is framed by two standards topped with Hathor's head. The other sides preserve fragmentary images of real and fantastical animals, not dissimilar to the ones represented on ivory wands.

Despite the lack of archaeological evidence, it is clear that birth bricks became so symbolically meaningful that they became part of the funerary equipment in the tombs of kings and high officials in the NK. These bricks were not the only obstetric tools that were readapted for funerary use: others were the apotropaic wands, and the *psš-kf* and *ntrw* blades.²⁵

As birth bricks are rarely preserved, except for the example from Abydos, we need to study these funerary bricks in order to understand their function. These bricks were placed in the burial chamber according to the prescriptions of chapter 151 of the *Book of the Dead*. The chapter mentions the special protective role of each brick, and prescribed the deposition of one brick in each of the four corners of the burial chamber. We do see small, floor-level niches in each corner for the deposition of these bricks, and sometimes such niches preserved the bricks from destruction.²⁶

As with the funerary bricks, birth bricks could have been placed at the corners of the birthing room. In this way, it would be useful to examine the corners of preserved domestic rooms to see whether there are similar niches that might have contained a birth brick. Placing protective items at the corners of a bedroom was an attested practice in the MK, as shown by this spell for the protection of the bedroom:

To be said over the four uraei made of pure clay and fire in their mouths. One is placed on each corner of each room in which there is a man or a woman sleeping.²⁷

In the Greco-Roman Period, birth bricks are mentioned as being placed in the corners of the temple of Edfu:

To strike the bricks. Word to be said: ‘I have modelled these into a brick form, and I struck bricks to build your house. Selected ground soil mixed with powdered resin and with Menur-incense. I form for you (from this mixture) these perfect birth bricks, in order to make the corners of your temple long-lasting.’²⁸

Birth bricks are also mentioned in NK spells as apotropaic objects that repel evil spirits threatening children. In a spell from the *Zaubersprüche für Mutter und Kind*, a group of spells for the protection of children, a brick had to be struck, in order to guarantee the protection of a newborn girl from the spirits of an Asian and Nubian woman:

O you, the one who spends the day moulding bricks for her father Osiris, she who has said about her father Osiris: ‘he should live on *d3is*-plants and honey!’

Break out, Asiatic woman there, who has come from the hill country, Nubian woman who has come from the desert! Are you a slave woman? Then come as <his> vomit. Are you a noblewoman? Then come as <his> piss. Come as the slime of his nose, come as the sweat of his limbs! My arms are over this child – the arms of Isis are over him, as she puts her arms over her son Horus.²⁹

The spell mentions the origins of the two female enemies to suggest from which part of the house they would be most likely to strike: presumably the Nubian from the south, and the Asian from the east or north.³⁰ The birth bricks had to be placed in these cardinal points of the house (or the room), in order to provide the best protection.

We do not know whether the domestic deposition of birth bricks continued into the Greco-Roman Period, but the protective disposition of birth bricks at the sides of a birthing room is mentioned in the Greco-Roman Hymn to Khnum, inscribed in the temple of Esna:

They have placed their four Meskhenet at their sides, to repel the designs of evil by incantations.³¹

3.1.3 *Spells for the birthing room*

Spells related to birth bricks, and those inscribed on apotropaic wands, show that the protection of the birthing room was considered essential for the positive outcome of a birth. Various other spells for the protection of the house, the bedroom and the birthing room were used from the Dynastic to the Late Dynastic and Greco-Roman Periods. For example, a Late Period spell was aimed at protecting the birth chamber:³²

Chapter to protect the bedchamber of the pregnant woman: Mrs so-and-so daughter of Mrs so-and-so sleeping on a reed mat while Isis holds her on her lap, Nephtys holds her from behind, Hathor is over her head and Renenutet under her legs; the great Ipet ensures her protection and the gods and the goddesses look after her. In case a male enemy comes, a female enemy, a deceased male, a deceased female, a male opponent, a female opponent, and so on, all the bad and hurting things that would occur against Mrs so-and-so daughter of Mrs so-and-so, at the hour of the day, when the seven fighters (arrows) will be very effective in repelling an opponent of Mrs so-and-so daughter of Mrs so-and-so, each one of them ensuring her protection.³³

In Greco-Roman Egypt, Seth-Typhon or Seth Incubus, a deity represented as an ithyphallic ass, was considered one of the worst supernatural threats to the house and its inhabitants. Seth Incubus was believed to attack people while they were sleeping and to cause fatal bleeding and miscarriage in pregnant women. The tradition of an evil entity, threatening people in their sleep, is attested from the Dynastic Period;³⁴ people were believed to be particularly vulnerable in their sleep because it was the realm of spirits. Therefore, from the NK onwards, spells appear for the protection of the house.³⁵ Indeed, a spell survives that seeks to prevent the spirits from provoking bleeding (miscarriage) in women.³⁶

Beliefs in Seth Incubus derive from the Egyptian myth, ‘The Contendings of Horus and Seth’, dating to the Twentieth Dynasty (c. 1190–1070 BC).³⁷ According to this, Horus, in adulthood, had been sexually assaulted by Seth, and later got his revenge by cutting his uncle’s testicles off.³⁸ This episode explains why Egyptians believed that the seed emitted by Seth was poisonous, as it derived from a violent rape. Indeed, the words ‘semen’ and ‘poison’ in Egyptian were written with similar signs, and pronounced in the same way (*mtwt*).³⁹

A spell dating back to the Dynastic Period mentions the use of Seth’s semen to defeat the spirits of a male or female demon:

This here is the ejaculation [of] Him-who-is-in-his-grimness which Mafdet received in that room wherein Isis rejoiced and wherein the testicles of Seth were cut off. Do not flee away (!) May the ejaculation of Horus and of

Him-who-is-in-his-grimness go forth against a male dead, a female dead, and so on - the name of the enemy, the name of his father, the name of his mother. Oh Mafdet! Open your mouth wide against that enemy, [the male dead], the female dead and so on - do not let me see him [] times.

Words to be said over the phallus of an [as]s, hardbaked (?) in the form of a *dp.t*-cake, provided with the name of the enemy, [the name] of his father and the name of his mother. To be placed within fat of meat and to be given to a cat.⁴⁰

The spell mentions the use of the phallus of an ass as a representation of the poisonous seed of Seth. The phallus cake had to be ritually defeated by a cat, who eats it, the cat presumably a personification of the feline goddess Mafdet.

In Greco-Roman Egypt, the tradition of the Seth-ass became very popular. The ass becomes the symbol of moral and bodily impurity: in Apuleius, it is presented as an animal with a strong sexual connotation.⁴¹ The Greeks also associated the ass with Dionysiac orgiastic rituals.⁴² The sexual connotation of the ass was not considered negative, but the traditional Egyptian idea of the ass was certainly seen in a negative light. Indeed, in Greco-Roman Egypt, the ass also represented all the obscure forces that were responsible for illness, in particular the miscarriage of women. The idea of a dangerous ass that threatened pregnant women would have been comprehensible the Greeks, who had their own tradition of baby-killing demons, perhaps a result of their shared Near-Eastern cultural inheritance.⁴³ In Mesopotamia, the baby-snatching demon Lamaštu had ass ears,⁴⁴ while in Greece the female monster Empousa had ass legs and feet.⁴⁵

In Egyptian magic, the most effective way to fight an enemy was using something that had a similar nature to their adversary. In this way, eating parts of the donkey was believed to treat diseases, particularly, but not only, those associated with women. To prevent the threat posed by Incubus, Egyptian medical texts prescribed that women eat parts of a donkey, in particular its testicles, before going to bed.⁴⁶ This tradition also appears in Hippocratic recipes for gynaecological diseases, even though the Hippocratic tradition seems more distant from any Sethian connotations; although Hippocratic recipes prescribed parts of the she-ass rather than the male ass.⁴⁷

The recipes against Seth-Typhon Incubus were not only produced as medicines to swallow, but also as potions to spread on the vulnerable parts of the house and the susceptible parts of its inhabitants. Two Demotic spells, translated into German by Westendorf, give us a good idea as to how the potions were used to keep Incubus outside the house, and away from the womb of pregnant women. As with the medicines, one of the most important ingredients in these potions was a part of an ass, in this case the heart. The same potion was anointed on the vulva of the woman, and then applied to the main boundaries of the house; it was smeared on the door or sprinkled inside its walls.

Another (remedy). One *ibs*-fish, the . . . anoint her vulva with it, and you shall sprinkle their door of her house with it⁴⁸

Another (remedy). Heart of a male (?) Ass is cooked. Ointment . . . and sprinkle the inside] the house in order.⁴⁹

The magical potions mentioned in these spells had to protect the vulva and the door of the house. Doors were believed to be the ways evil spirits entered the house.

A category of terracotta lamp, produced in Egypt from the 3rd until about the 5th century AD, could also be related to birth rituals. These lamps are called 'frog lamps' by scholars because many of them represent this animal.⁵⁰ Frogs in Ancient Egypt were identified with the goddess Heqet, who is patron of both childbirth and rebirth. Other lamps of this type show a modification of the frog theme, and an even closer connection with childbirth. For instance, there are lamps that represent the face of the god Bes,⁵¹ and others that represent embryos in their mother's wombs.⁵² One lamp, dating to the beginning of the 4th century AD, represents two embryos facing each other, with both pointing at their mother's vagina orifice, situated by the beak of the lamp.⁵³ The clear association between these lamps and childbirth suggests that they may have been used in domestic cults to protect pregnant and childbearing women. Another interpretation is that they were used for funerary rituals of rebirth for the dead; other representations of explicit childbirth scenes are known from two monochrome wall paintings from a 1st century BC tomb chapel in Hermopolis.⁵⁴ However, the archaeological context of these lamps, when known, is generally urban not funerary.⁵⁵

A more obscure ritual practice is attested in 4th century AD Kellis, where a miscarried foetus was found in roof rubble of a house's upper room.⁵⁶ Frankfurter does not give a definite interpretation: he argues that foetuses' bodies could be used as powerful 'tools' for sorcery but he also reckons that the Kellis foetus was probably not used for a curse. Nothing can be said conclusively, unless there are new similar finds from Egypt, but it may be possible that the presence of a foetus on the roof may suggest that it was thrown for protection or good luck. Since the Dynastic Period, mothers who had a miscarriage, or lost their baby, were invited to wear amulets to protect themselves from the negative power of the deceased child, who was believed to be able to endanger any future births.⁵⁷ Perhaps, maintaining the body of the dead foetus on the roof kept the evil power of the deceased under control, and at the same time propitiated it to aid the birth of a new child. However, such protection would have been different from the one provided by the Demotic birthing room rituals mentioned above: the ritual required for this room was only a temporary one, while throwing or placing a foetus on the roof meant protecting the house permanently.

3.2 Votive images of women

In this study of women's bodies and reproduction it is crucial to see how society represented them in religious and ritual contexts. In order to comprehend the social perception of real women's bodies, it is important to understand how women's bodies were associated with magical rituals and religious beliefs that were intrinsic

to Ancient Egyptian people. Images of women with eroticised bodies or pregnant bellies were believed to magically promote a pregnancy or to protect real women in labour. However, these images can also be found in less obvious contexts such as the tombs of children, both newborn and older, and medical contexts. What role did the depiction of the female body play in these circumstances?

The archaeological evidence from Ancient Egypt includes a vast number of miniatures, statuettes, amulets and drawings that represent naked women, or female body parts. Most of these objects are attested from the MK onwards, but increased from the Late Period, reaching a peak in the Greco-Roman era. A full typological study of these objects and a complete survey of their archaeological contexts lies beyond the aim of this book, but I will provide a thorough survey of votive images of women related to fertility, pregnancy and childbirth from the Dynastic to the Greco-Roman Period.

The discussion will have two aims: 1) it will discuss how and in which contexts naked female bodies were represented in Ancient Egypt. 2) It will analyse these objects over a broad chronological period. Female figurines dating from the Dynastic Period will be included in order to show the typological and iconographic continuity they share with the Greco-Roman era, something noted before but never analysed in detail. For the Greco-Roman Period, I have selected various figurines and iconographic themes in order to discuss the survival of traditional Egyptian elements, as well as the appearance of new Greco-Roman ones. More importantly, I will show that the change in the representation of women's bodies might reflect a gradual change in religious beliefs and social values.

3.2.1 Votive images of women in the Dynastic Period

Most of the votive images of women in the Dynastic Period are small statues made of faïence, raw or baked clay, ivory, wood or limestone, and measure between 3 and 30 cm. They were produced from the MK until the NK, with some types still produced in the Late Dynastic Period and others in the Roman Period. The most in-depth study of these figurines was made by Geraldine Pinch,⁵⁸ who classified more than 700 examples of MK and NK figurines with a known archaeological context, and divided them into six main types, which are still used by scholars today. Pinch's types were found in different archaeological contexts: villages, mines, houses, tombs and temples. The main finds come from the settlements of Deir el-Bahri, Faras, Mirgissa, Serabit el-Khadim and Gebel Zeit (some examples also came from Dendara and Koptos). Pinch also discussed other artefacts that resemble the female body: pebbles (from Mirgissa, Timna and Deir el Medina), metal plaques (from Faras) and models of the breasts and genitals (from Deir el-Bahri and Deir el-Medina). The typology made by Pinch was limited to MK and NK archaeological contexts, but was later expanded by Waraska with her study of ceramic female figurines, found by the Johns Hopkins excavation at the Precinct of Mut in Luxor between 2001 and 2004; these date from the NK to the Late Period (c. 1550–332 BC).⁵⁹

In 2013, Backhouse published an article on NK female figurines from Deir el Medina, where she explained their possible function in relation to their typology and archaeological context.⁶⁰ The classifications by Pinch, Waraska and Backhouse have some limitations though. First of all, they are very much focused on clay, pottery, ivory, wood and faïence figurines, and give less importance to other materials, such as pebbles, bricks and ostraca. In addition, Pinch and Backhouse only focus on the Dynastic Period from the MK to the NK, even though some types continue into the Late Dynastic Period⁶¹ and beyond.⁶² Another limitation in these classifications is the absence of some typologies which should be included in a thorough study of Ancient Egyptian female figurines; namely clay figurines with large hips, paddle dolls,⁶³ hand-modelled figurines, ostraca and female-shaped bread loaves (my types 5–9).

Because of these issues with earlier classifications, I have formulated a new list of nine types, which I will present in the sections below. My first four types (1–4) still broadly relate to Pinch's six types,⁶⁴ but the remaining five types (5–9) are not described in Pinch's classification, although some examples were mentioned in her later book.⁶⁵ Types 5–9 are, however, published elsewhere, individually in articles,⁶⁶ and also on online museum catalogues. Most of my nine types are described as Dynastic because they date to that period and disappeared after the NK, but a few types are also produced in the Late Dynastic Period (type 3), and others continue to be produced in the Roman era (type 1B). This classification does not include all Dynastic female figurines, and could still be improved and expanded in the future. A complete study of the typologies, materials, chronology and archaeological contexts of Dynastic female figurines, deserves in-depth research, but the scope of this chapter means I will mainly focus on Greco-Roman female figurines.

3.2.1.1 *Type 1: Standing figurines*

My type 1 figurines relates to Pinch's type 1, but I have added more examples from museums to help clarify better the characteristics of this type and to show its continuity into the Roman Period. Type 1 figurines are standing statuettes made of faïence, limestone, ivory and wood, and date from the MK to the Roman Period, and measure between 6 and 20 cm. Many of these figurines are now in museums with unknown provenance. The figurines with a known archaeological context mainly come from tombs,⁶⁷ but at least two come from domestic contexts, in Kahun.⁶⁸ No type 1 figurines were found in Egyptian temples; elsewhere, only a group of eight figurines were found in the temple of the Obelisks in Byblos.⁶⁹

For my classification I have simplified Pinch's subdivision of type 1 into five groups (A–E), and reduced it to two (1A and 1B). Her subdivision was mainly based on the style and shape of the wig, while mine takes into account the materials, chronology, hairstyle, decoration, and presence of a child. All 1A figurines are made of blue and green faïence, depict the genitals and have decoration (pubic triangle, necklace, girdle, tattoos) painted in black. 1B figurines are made of limestone, ivory or wood;⁷⁰ in the limestone figurines the body can be painted

using yellow paint, but otherwise the decorative work is either in black paint or is carved (in the ivory and wooden examples). Regarding chronology: group 1A all date to the Middle Kingdom, while group 1B dates from the Middle Kingdom into the Roman Period.

None of the 1A figurines are represented with a child, while a few of those in the 1B group do have a child, and always situated on the left lap (Figure 1B, right).⁷¹ As for hairstyle: 1A and 1B have a few elements in common: they never wear a headdress,⁷² can have either a bob cut or a long wig with holes for the insertion of real hair,⁷³ or can have a mud bead wig.⁷⁴ Similar to this is the painted black hairstyle.⁷⁵ An element that appears only on type 1B is the short and curly bob cut.⁷⁶

Figurines 1A and 1B have different decoration, but a common characteristic: their body is represented only to the knees, so they cannot stand unsupported (except for rare cases such as 1B WAM 71.505 which has feet). Figurines of type 1A are three dimensions and are decorated both at the front and rear. Some wear a necklace with a shell,⁷⁷ others a protective amulet.⁷⁸ Some have a cowrie shell girdle and tattoos on the legs and shoulders. The tattoos are either rhomboidal groups of dots or sets of horizontal lines, which could be interpreted as signs of scarification.⁷⁹ The navel and pubic triangle are marked in black (Figure 3.2).

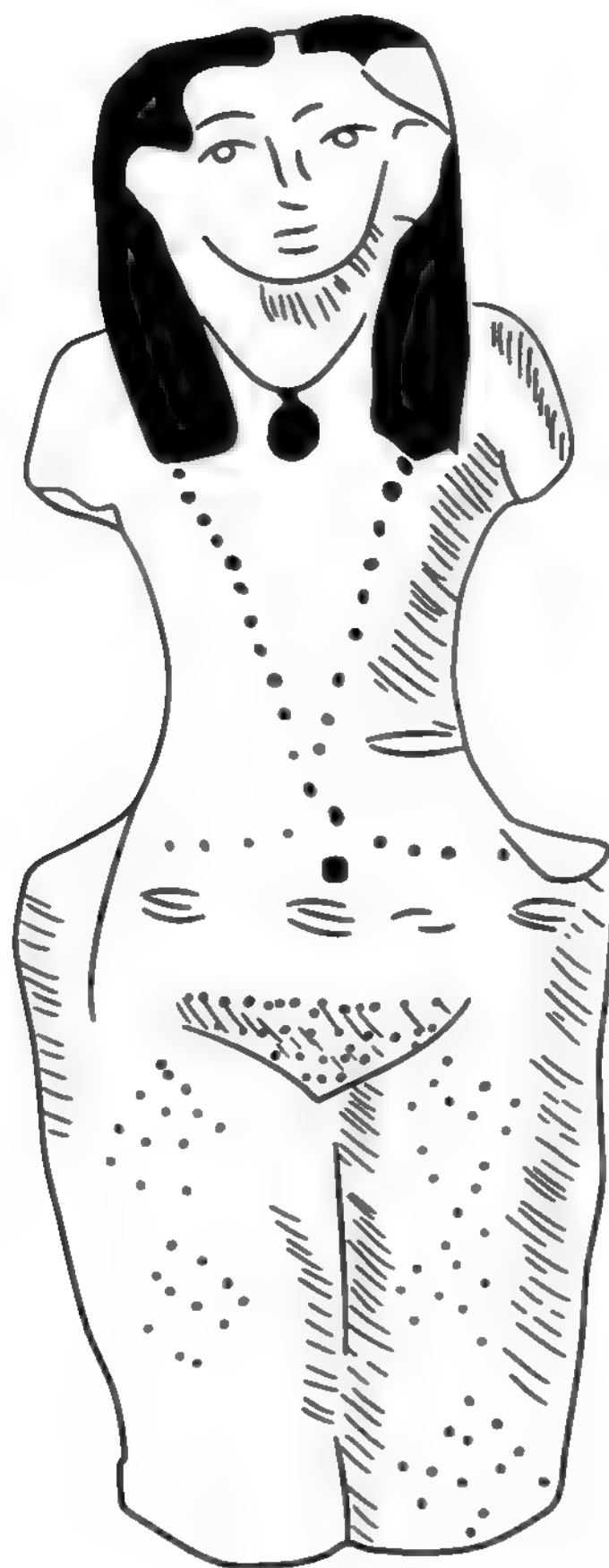


Figure 3.2 Type 1A, blue faience naked female figurine from a tomb, maybe a Hathoric khener dancer. Her attributes are a necklace with a round pendant, two crossed chest-bands, a cowrie shell girdle and three squares of dotted tattoos on both her legs. New Kingdom. From Egypt.

1B type figurines have a slender waist and are completely naked, except for occasional decoration.⁸⁰ However, unlike the type 1A examples, 1B figurines never have tattoos nor scarifications. The navel is sometimes marked with a circle, but this is a way to mark out that part of the body, rather than an example of body decoration.

3.2.1.2 Type 2: Baked pottery or faïence moulded figurines

My type 2 figurines relate to Pinch's types 4 and 5,⁸¹ two very rare types whose production was limited to a narrow chronological period, between the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th Dynasty. I chose to include this group of figurines under my type 2 because although very similar to type 1, they appeared later and never became as widespread. Type 2 is very similar to type 1 because it represents a group of standing female figurines with a realistic face, but their archaeological context is different. While no type 1 figurines were found in Egyptian temples, type 2 examples were mainly found in such contexts,⁸² particularly in the Mut precinct, at Deir el-Bahari and at Faras. Some of these figurines were also found in domestic areas, such as a group of twenty-three figurines found by Bruyère in Deir el-Medina.⁸³ Only a few, rare examples were found in tombs.⁸⁴

The material and technique of type 2 figurines differ from those of type 1; type 2 examples are made of faïence but also of baked pottery, a material never seen in type 1. Also, unlike type 1 figurines which were three-dimensional, type 2 examples were all created from an open mould with only one decorated side, so the back is flat and undecorated. Type 2 figurines measure 3–22 cm.⁸⁵ The faïence examples are dark green or bright blue, while the pottery examples have traces of yellow paint. They are never represented with a child, but in some contexts they were found with models of beds or with statuettes of children.⁸⁶ Type 2 figurines are all naked, with elongated bodies, small breasts, slender waists, and very rough feet. Most of them have no decoration.⁸⁷ The few that do⁸⁸ hold a lotus flower or a *menat* necklace or perhaps a *was*-sceptre.⁸⁹ Some of them also wear a necklace and have a decorative row of dots at the hip level (Figure 3.3).⁹⁰

The hairstyles of type 2 are similar to those seen on type 1 figurines: either a long tripartite wig or a bob haircut that covers the ears. They normally lack a headdress, except for a kerchief surmounted by a tall circular diadem, which in some cases had holes for the insertion of human or artificial hair decorated with mud beads.⁹¹ An exception to the general absence of a headdress is the group of figurines found by Bruyère in Deir el-Medina.⁹² These have a long wig and a tall modius, which recalls Greco-Roman terracotta figurines. The simplest figurines of this type present a sort of rim around the body, which closely resembles the NK figurines of women with a bed,⁹³ described in the type below.

3.2.1.3 Type 3: Bed figurines

This group of figurines, that sit or lie on a bed, correspond to Pinch's type 6. I chose to call it type 3 for two reasons: first of all some examples of type 2 are



Figure 3.3 Type 2: fragmentary naked female figurine with an incised pubic triangle and a dotted girdle. Baked pottery. New Kingdom, 18th–19th Dynasty. From Egypt.

similar to those of type 3,⁹⁴ and secondly, type 2 figurines date to roughly the same time as the earliest type 3 examples (between 18th and 19th Dynasty). However, type 3 figurines continue up until the Late Dynastic Period, with a further transformation in the Ptolemaic era, that will be discussed below.

Type 3 figurines are made of faïence, pottery and limestone and measure 10–20 cm.⁹⁵ Some pottery examples have bodies painted in yellow or red, with hair and body details in black. The figurines represent naked women lying on a bed, alone or with a child (a newborn or a toddler). In the NK models, the women could be either detached⁹⁶ or integrated within the bed;⁹⁷ the child, when represented, lies next to the mother.⁹⁸ From the Late Period, the woman is always integrated into the bed rather than detached from it. By this time, when the child is represented, it is either lying next to the mother,⁹⁹ as with the NK beds, or perpendicular to the mother, in a foetal position (Figure 3.4).¹⁰⁰

Type 3 figurines of women attached to a bed without a child¹⁰¹ are not only very similar to some type 2 examples, but also to Late Bronze IB-IIA (c. 1470–1300 BC) votive plaques of the Canaanite goddess Astarte. These were produced in areas of the South Levant, which had contacts with Egypt.¹⁰²



Figure 3.4 Type 3: woman in bed with child playing with her hair. The naked woman is lying on a couch with four legs, with her head on a pillow, and the left arm lying across the waist above the navel. Her child is lying over her head touching her hair. On the top of the couch there is a rosette and a zig-zag design in red and black on top of the couch. Limestone with traces of paint. Late Period, 26th Dynasty. From Egypt.

3.2.1.4 Type 4: Beak nose figurines

Type 4 figurines correspond to Pinch's types 2–3. This group includes figurines made of grey-brown unbaked clay measuring 12–28 cm. These figurines date to the 12th–18th Dynasty, but they were mainly produced during the Second Intermediate Period (1782–1570 BC) (SIP). I chose to include these figurines under a 'type 4' because they seem to be a rougher version of my types 1 and 2, and present a less realistic face with a beak nose and horizontal lines for the eyes and mouth. The examples without children are standing figures with their arms along their body. However a type 4 figurine with a child exists that is sitting down and is breastfeeding it.¹⁰³

Type 4 figurines share the same sort of decoration with those of type 1; we see earrings, cowrie girdles, heavy necklaces and crossed chest-bands represented. With type 2 they share the same flat and elongated body with small round breasts, narrow waist, flat belly and incomplete feet, that means they cannot stand up unsupported. However, type 4 figurines have some peculiar aspects: they are

made of grey-brown unbacked clay, their pubic triangle is mostly incised rather than painted, and all decorations are made of clay. The earrings, which are generally not preserved, were probably made of clay beads; the broad clay collar, which imitates a heavy necklace, is roughly modelled and sometimes dotted. A figurine from the Louvre (E 27257) has an additional collar made of small faïence beads. Sometimes a girdle and/or two bands across the chest are traced with dots.

Some type 4 figurines have a particularly remarkable hairstyle: a group of figurines from the site of Gebel Zeit, and now at the Louvre,¹⁰⁴ have a coiffure made with unbaked mud beads (see the hairstyle of type 9 paddle dolls) or, more rarely, made with shells. Some of these statuettes were also found wrapped in decorated linen with a set of jewels. Other type 4 figurines have elaborate hairstyles rendered in clay: some have several locks and a diadem,¹⁰⁵ others have two locks flanking the face and a third lock behind, while the rest of the head seems to be shaven (Figure 3.5).¹⁰⁶

Their beak nosed face reminds us of Syrian figurines produced in Carchemish (Tabqa-Euphrates area), during the Late Bronze Age (late 3rd millennium BC).¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the fact that these type 4 figurines were largely made during the SIP,



Figure 3.5 Type 4: beak nosed female figurine with tripartite hairstyle. The woman wears a thick necklace and has a circle of dots around the navel as well as a fragmentary dotted girdle. From Egypt.

when Egypt was ruled by the Hyksos Dynasty, makes an eastern influence on their design very likely. Many type 4 figurines were found in Gebel Zeit,¹⁰⁸ a mountain area by the Red Sea. Between the SIP and the beginning of the NK (1800–1500 BC), Gebel Zeit had important mines of galena (lead sulphide used for the production of the eye cosmetic kohl) whose patron was the goddess Hathor, worshipped there as the ‘Lady of the Galena’. The sanctuary received plenty of votive offerings including type 4 figurines like the ones preserved at the Louvre Museum. Pinch notes that these figurines are the first votive offerings dating to the MK-SIP attested in an Egyptian temple. Type 4 examples were also found in the Hathor sanctuaries of Faras and Deir el-Bahari.¹⁰⁹

3.2.1.5 Type 5: Paddle dolls

Another group of figurines certainly related to the cult of Hathor, and produced between the MK and SIP, are the so-called paddle dolls. Their name derives from their paddle-shaped body, which recalls the *menat* counterpoise used as a musical instrument during the rituals for Hathor (Figure 3.34).¹¹⁰ These figurines had a *menat* shaped body made of wood, and the head (when it is preserved) is either made of wood as well or is roughly modelled using unbaked clay. The eyes are made of beads pressed into the clay, while the head is threaded with strings and unbaked mud beads (Figure 3.6).¹¹¹

The bodies measure between 6 and 11 cm in length, but there are examples, such as BM 23071, which are longer. Both sides of the wooden paddle are decorated with painting and/or with exaggerated genitals.¹¹² One headless doll from



Figure 3.6 Type 5: wooden paddle doll with hair made of strings and clay beads. Middle Kingdom. From tomb in Beni Hasan, Egypt.

the MK has a Figure of Taweret where normally the genitals would be shown.¹¹³ In the Egyptian mind, a *menat* shaped body was comparable to a pregnant body: the most striking evidence for this is a NK ostrakon which represents a *menat* counterpoise and a pregnant body at the same time.¹¹⁴

Many paddle dolls come from Upper Egypt, and examples are particularly numerous at Thebes, for instance from the necropolis of Asasif.¹¹⁵ One doll comes from the 13th Dynasty tomb found under the Ramesseum; this tomb is thought to belong to a lector priest or a magician because of the materials found in it.¹¹⁶

3.2.1.6 Type 6: Figurine with large hips

Type 6 are flat clay figurines (Figure 3.7)¹¹⁷ with small heads, fragmentary arms resting below the small breasts, large hips and a pubic triangle heavily emphasised with dots. They are 18–21 cm in height,¹¹⁸ and could have been produced in the late NK (20th–22nd Dynasty),¹¹⁹ even though Bruyère suggests a much earlier date for the ones he found in Deir el-Medina.¹²⁰ This design probably originates from the Near East; the Petrie Museum suggests a Babylonian origin.¹²¹



Figure 3.7 Type 6: female figurine with very large hips and a dotted incised pubic triangle. The hair is divided into two large locks along the face, finished with incised decorations. The eyes are large discs like in the figurines of Sumerian and Babylonian tradition. The hands are joint together at the height of the navel. Legs are incomplete and interrupt just above the knees.

3.2.1.7 Type 7: Clay models of pregnant bodies

Type 7 consists of a group of hand-modelled clay figurines.¹²² These figurines are without legs and with roughly modelled heads, although sometimes this is not present. The breasts, the navel and the vulva are indicated with dots or lines. Despite the rough representation of the body, the protruding belly shows that the figurine represents a pregnant woman. Votive images of pregnant women are rarely represented in Dynastic Egyptian iconography, with the exception of the *Gravidenflaschen*¹²³ and the representations of the goddess Taweret.¹²⁴ Another representation of pregnancy is offered by the type 8 figurines, discussed below.

3.2.1.8 Type 8: Ostraca, pebbles, bread loaves

Type 8 figurines, all dating to the NK and all found in houses and tombs in Deir el-Medina, represent women with a roughly made face, and with a particular stress on the sexual and reproductive body parts (breast, belly button and genitals).¹²⁵ This type includes a group of ostraca dating to the NK, that were found by Bruyère in private houses in Deir el Medina.¹²⁶ One of these ostraca represents a woman who wears a necklace and a girdle, the latter schematically represented by two decorative rows of dots around the hips. Both the navel and vulva are represented in relief. The round-shaped body suggests that these figurines represent pregnant women.

Type 8 also includes a group of stone pebbles of various sizes with painted decoration, found both in Deir el Medina's private houses and in the workmen's huts near the Valley of the Kings.¹²⁷ The pebbles can be divided into two groups: a group of round examples represent naked women with a protruding belly and a lotus-shaped vulva. The round-shaped and protruding belly suggests that these figurines represent pregnant women. In one of the pebbles, a woman wears a heavy wig, a necklace and has a lotus flower on her forehead. Another group of pebbles show women with large wigs and large breasts. The production of pebbles representing women in the NK was associated with the cult of Hathor.¹²⁸

I also included in this type a group of scarcely studied bread loaves, that represent two naked women and a man (Figure 3.8). They all have a roughly made faces, legless bodies, and thin arms resting on the belly; the two naked women have visible breasts and round bellies. The round-shaped belly again suggests that the two female figurines represent pregnant women. These loaves, unlike the ostraca and pebbles, were found in a funerary context, in association with children buried in bread baskets in the necropolis east of Deir el-Medina.¹²⁹

3.2.1.9 Type 9: Models of breasts and female genitals

Pinch has found a very small group of NK models of breasts in Deir el-Bahri. One model of breasts is an oval dark blue frit plaque,¹³⁰ with a hole for a suspension, which may indicate an amuletic use. Pinch also noticed that breasts were not just represented as amulets but also as decoration on pottery vases.¹³¹

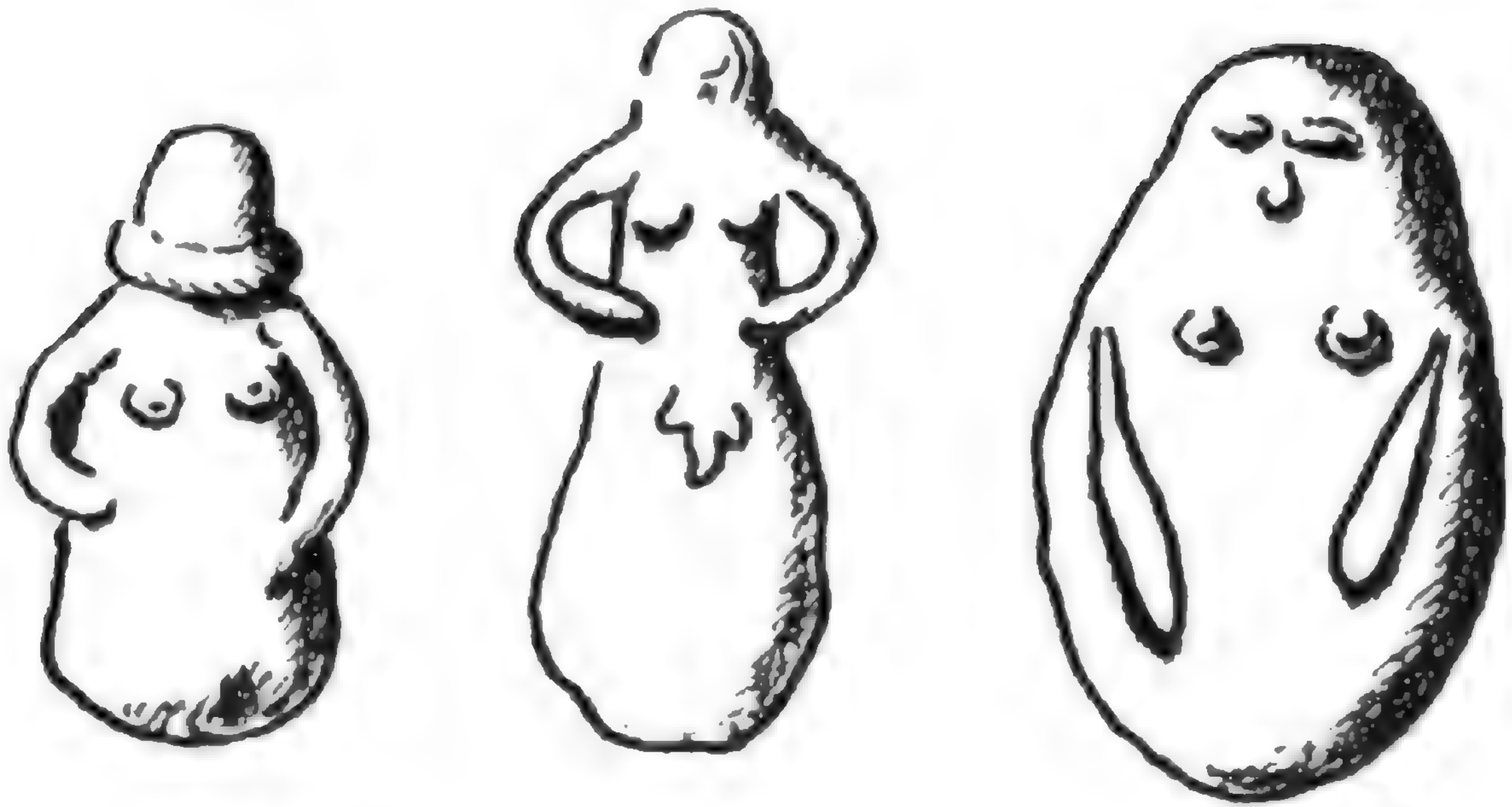


Figure 3.8 Type 8: Bread loaves representing two naked women with visible breasts and one man. Found in association with children buried in bread baskets. Necropolis East, Deir el-Medina. New Kingdom.



Figure 3.9 Type 9: model of female torso with pronounced breasts and navel. Terracotta. Dynastic Period possibly New Kingdom. From Egypt, exact provenance unknown.

Very small faïence models of female genitalia, represented as simple pubic triangles with a vertical incision, were also found in Deir el-Bahri. At the same site similar models of phalli were also found.¹³² Other pottery models of female genitalia were found by Bruyère in houses at Deir el-Medina.¹³³

3.2.1.10 Theories about the functions of the Dynastic Figurines

Most of the Dynastic figurines do not have many attributes nor decoration. However, even in the simplest of models, the female figurines had a certain eroticism deriving from their emphasis on the pubic triangle. This part was either marked in black (types 1, 2), with a vertical incision (type 4), or with dots (types 6).

The hairstyle was often as much of a feature as the reproductive parts of the body (navel, breast and pubic triangle). For instance, in type 1 figurines, the hair was at times painted with the same black colour as that used to mark the pubic triangle.¹³⁴ Indeed, Derchain has argued that the act of wearing a wig could have an erotic connotation, because Egyptian women wore it before a sexual encounter with men.¹³⁵ Every Egyptian woman waiting for a man in advance of intercourse adorned herself with the attributes of Hathor: she wore the Hathoric wig, the wig of 'the goddess with a beautiful hairstyle' and admired herself in a *sistrum*-shaped mirror, which imitated the sacred musical instrument of Hathor. The goddess Hathor was also associated with fertility and childbirth, which suggests an association between most of these figurines and both sex and maternity. Pinch argued that in the 2nd millennium BC, these figurines were dedicated to Hathor, and in the 1st millennium to Isis, who was also worshipped as a mother goddess.¹³⁶

A clear association between these figurines and maternity is apparent from the occasional presence of a child,¹³⁷ but also perhaps the tripartite hairstyle.¹³⁸ Brunner-Traut's study of the iconography of the tripartite hairstyle noted that it was common in NK representations of mothers in ostraca from Deir el-Medina and in wall paintings from Amarna. Thus, she argued that this hairstyle is peculiar to women who had just given birth.¹³⁹ The standing position (seen in types 1, 2, 4, 5, 6) is certainly the most common one for female figurines, but another common type were the figurines of women lying on a bed (type 3).

Interestingly, the figurines of types 1 and 4 were sometimes found in tombs within the funerary equipment of men. This had made scholars think that they could have been buried as 'concubines' for the dead, amulets that enhanced their sexuality in the afterlife.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, the lack of legs in types 1 and 4 had been explained as a way to prevent the figurine from leaving the tomb. However, this theory has now been shown to be incorrect as some of these figurines were found in tombs of women (Figure 3.2),¹⁴¹ and they have also appeared in non-funerary contexts, such as in urban areas.¹⁴² In my opinion, it is more plausible that the figurines were made without legs because only the parts necessary for erotic attraction, conception and birth needed to be represented.

Although the definition of these figurines as 'concubines of the dead' is questionable, the importance of their funerary function should not be overlooked. Because the figurines were associated with ideas of fertility, they might have been included in the burial to enhance the possibility of rebirth for the dead individual in the afterlife; it need not imply sexual intercourse between the figurine and the dead. If we consider these figurines as magical aids for rebirth, rather than a tool to bring back male sexual vitality, it means their funerary deposition was

suitable for both genders and for all age groups. The female-shaped bread loaves (type 8), found in the infant burials of Deir el-Medina (Figure 3.8), show that even prematurely deceased infants could benefit from the *heka* (magical power) of these images of fertility. The pregnant body represented in these bread loaves might also be a form of prayer by the mothers of these children, to ask to be able to conceive another baby.

The function of all these figurines is still very much debated though, and the variety of contexts in which they were found suggests more than one possible use. The three-dimensional refined type 1 was found in many contexts for example, suggesting that it had more than one function. Type 2 figurines, which look like a simplified version of type 1 (made with a single mould, with a flat back and without decoration), were found in various contexts too, but were mainly from the Mut precinct of Luxor and the temple of Deir el-Bahari, suggesting a largely votive use.¹⁴³ These figurines could have either been offerings, or magical objects, which were brought to the temple, consecrated with the power of the deity, and then brought home for a domestic use.¹⁴⁴

Some figurines found in rubbish deposits were broken in antiquity, therefore it may be that they were charged with magical power only temporarily, and so once used were then discarded.¹⁴⁵ This theory seems to be supported by the wording of some spells which mention the medical use of clay female figurines, such as P. Turin 54003 and P. Leiden I 348.¹⁴⁶ According to Waraska, the reason why fertility figurines represented a generic woman, and not a particular female deity, was that a vague representation of a goddess made the deity less vulnerable to the evil forces that she had to fight.¹⁴⁷ When the spell was pronounced, the figurine became a temporary receptacle of the power of the goddess: the deity descended into its clay simulacrum to fight the demonic forces causing the ailment. The female figurine was then discarded by its user because it was believed to be charged with the negative power of the ailment.

Even though many figurines did not represent any specific goddesses, some of them (types 1A and 5) did wear the attributes of Hathoric dancers. Most of the type 1A and type 5 figurines are nude, and in some examples they only wear protective bands across their chest; these were called ‘Libyan bands’ but were also worn by the *hnr* dancers of Hathor and by Hathor priestesses.¹⁴⁸ These chest-bands may also depict the still mysterious *tstn*,¹⁴⁹ a knot that was tied on the bust of Hathoric devotees, and the nudity of types 1A and 5 suggests that *hnr* dancers of Hathor (and maybe priestesses) danced nude.¹⁵⁰ This theory seems to be supported by one scene in a MK Theban tomb, which shows a group of Hathoric *hnr* dancers that are bare-chested while performing a dance at a funeral.¹⁵¹

Another element that should be considered when interpreting these objects is the linen wrapping found around some type 4 figurines discovered at the sanctuary of Hathor in Gebel Zeit.¹⁵² If the wrappings are interpreted as the figurines’ clothes, then this would mean that not all these objects were meant to be represented naked. However, more convincing perhaps is the theory that the wrapping kept the magical power of the figurine under control, a power which could only be revealed during rituals. The magical power of the figurine possibly derived

from its explicit nudity, or from its close connection with Hathor. Nevertheless, whatever our interpretation of the linen, the existence of such wrappings does not necessarily mean that all female figurines were covered in this way. Perhaps these examples simply point to a ritual practice adopted in temples during the MK and SIP.

Sometimes, the female figurines deposited in tombs were inscribed with a prayer directed at a close dead relative or to a distinguished craftsman or official. The *ka* of the dead was supposed to have some magical power, through which it was somehow able to intercede for a living person before the deities. On the left thigh of a MK figurine holding a child, a woman inscribed a prayer to her dead father:

May a birth be given to your daughter Seh.¹⁵³

Another inscription can be found on both thighs of another female figurine with a child:

An offering which the king gives for the *ka* of Khonsu: a birth for Tita.¹⁵⁴

Another very rare but interesting attribute for Dynastic female figurines, is the leonine mask. Three MK figurines belong to this type, two made of wood and one made of faïence.¹⁵⁵

3.2.2 *Votive images of women in the Late and Greco-Roman Periods*

In the long phase from the Third Intermediate Period (1070–712 BC) (TIP) to the Greco-Roman Period, fertility images went through a radical transformation. However, Dynastic Period fertility figurines did not disappear completely, they just evolved, assimilating new ideas and styles.

Greek iconography influenced Egyptian iconography from the Ptolemaic Period onwards, but the first elements of syncretism can be observed as early as the Late Period in the areas of Egypt inhabited by Greeks. The main urban centres in Egypt inhabited by both Egyptians and Greeks were Naucratis and Heracleion. There was also a large group of Greek mercenaries in the area of Memphis, and smaller groups in the areas where protective garrisons were established, in order to guard the Egyptian borders.

Such Greek influence led to various transformations within the production of fertility images. For example, while in the previous period figurines were mainly produced in faïence, from the Ptolemaic era on they were mainly produced in terracotta. Also, these terracotta figurines, normally produced with one or two moulds, were plainer and less shiny than earlier faïence figurines. However, most of them were painted with polychrome paints, as in many early Hellenistic Tanagra-style terracottas.¹⁵⁶

Terracotta figurines are the most studied category of Greco-Roman fertility images.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, many scholars tend to focus too much on them, without taking

into account that cultic images were also represented (with similar postures and attributes) on two-dimensional objects such as gems, funerary wooden tablets, ostraca and wall paintings. As such, my survey will cover not just terracotta figurines but also objects made of other materials that represent similar fertility-related images.

The iconography of Late Period and Greco-Roman fertility-related images has been looked at, but analyses have tended to focus on a few iconographic types. A general, fully comprehensive classification, like those produced by scholars examining Dynastic fertility figurines, is still missing for Late Period and Greco-Roman fertility images. This absence of a general typological classification, has resulted in imprecise terminology to define these typologies.

My survey of fertility images is not a complete classification of all fertility-related images attested from the Late Period to the Late Roman Period; such a study is beyond the scope of this book. Nevertheless, this survey of the different typologies and materials will show: 1) some elements of continuity as well as change in fertility images dating to the Dynastic Period; 2) the main features where we see religious assimilation with Greek cults in fertility images; 3) the possible function of the images according to their archaeological context.

3.2.2.1 *Continuity from the Dynastic Period: Types 1B and 3*

Statuettes representing standing female figurines (type 1B) are produced without any break from the Dynastic until the Late Roman Period. These figurines are often legless, the quality of the depiction of the face is poor, while sexual attributes are emphasised. They are usually made of clay, but examples also exist made of bone, wood or faïence. They have an elongated body or one that is well proportioned. Some figurines are also very roughly made, as in previous periods. The standing figurines do not show any particular attributes, so they cannot be linked to a specific cult, even if they do show attributes of goddesses at times.¹⁵⁸ Legs are sometimes intentionally broken, perhaps indicating that these figurines were discarded after a ritual use.¹⁵⁹ This could indicate that the Pharaonic tradition of transferring the magical power of a deity onto these figurines, and then discarding them by breaking them, continued into the Late Period.

Another group of figurines still produced in the Late and Greco-Roman Periods are the type 3 ‘bed figurines’. These representations of female figurines in bed continued into the Greco-Roman Period, even if the child now rarely appears. From the Late Period, there are a few examples of a bed that looks more like a *naiskos*. A figure within a *naiskos* was reserved for domestic deities, worshipped in house niches.¹⁶⁰ One of these types of deities was certainly Bes, as demonstrated by a Late Dynastic terracotta plaque from Naukratis, showing a woman standing in a *naiskos* flanked by two Bes figurines.¹⁶¹ The context of the bed-*naiskos* and the association with Bes suggest the prevalent use of these plaques in domestic cults.¹⁶²

3.2.2.2 Isis Aphrodite

Isis Aphrodite became a common ‘type’ from the Ptolemaic Period onwards.¹⁶³ From this time the goddess Isis was assimilated with the Egyptian goddess Hathor and the Greek goddess Aphrodite. Isis, the sister and wife of Osiris and the mother of Horus, was considered the mother goddess par excellence. In many legends and spells she was depicted as a protective mother who defended her child, thus, many Egyptian women could identify with her. Both Hathor and Aphrodite were goddesses of love, eroticism and fertility. Some Isis Aphrodite figurines bear the name ‘Anasyrmene’, as they depict the goddess lifting her dress with her hands showing her vulva (Figure 3.11). This act can be associated with two Egyptian rituals dedicated to Bastet and Apis, described by Herodotus and Diodorus, respectively.¹⁶⁴ Isis Aphrodite adopted this gesture from the cult of Bastet because Isis and Bastet were strongly assimilated from the Late Period onwards; the origin of this gesture also derives from the association of Isis and Bastet with Hathor. In the *Contendings of Horus and Seth*, the goddess Hathor ‘uncovered her vagina’ (*kfi k3t.st*), before Re, who laughed.¹⁶⁵ Hathor was also traditionally known as the ‘Lady of the Vulva’ (*nbt-htpt*),¹⁶⁶ and the dances in her honour had a marked eroticism.¹⁶⁷

This gesture can be seen in a type 3 figure plaque with a woman in relief, which in my opinion is Late Dynastic and possibly from Naukratis (Figure 3.10).¹⁶⁸ The



Figure 3.10 Isis-Astarte performing the gesture of the Anasyrmene. Terracotta. Late Dynastic Period (?). From Naukratis (?), Egypt.

woman lifts her dress with both her hands and has her hair tied up into a large diadem. The figurine could be associated with the Phoenician Astarte and it might have been imported from Cyprus, like many of the Late Dynastic figurines found in Naukratis.¹⁶⁹

From the Ptolemaic Period, many terracottas of Isis Aphrodite were produced: the goddess is represented standing up, naked or with a dress that covers her until the upper part of the legs. When she is naked she wears two protective bands that cross her breasts (Figure 3.12). A type 1A NK figurine (Figure 3.1) presents chest-bands which are similar to the ones worn by Isis Aphrodite (Figure 3.13 and 3.14 left and middle).¹⁷⁰ These chest-bands have a clear connection to the *hnr* dance in honour of Hathor.¹⁷¹ The Hathoric chest-bands in Isis Aphrodite and her high *kalathos* spread outside Egypt and became a feature of some 1st century BC 'Oriental Aphrodite' terracottas produced in Myrina, Asia Minor.¹⁷²

Most of the time, Isis Aphrodite has a complex hairstyle with long wavy hair, a wreath of flowers and a high *kalathos*, in front of which a small version of a



Figure 3.11 Isis Aphrodite Anasyr(o)mene lifting her dress. Terracotta. 3rd–2nd century BC (?).



Figure 3.12 Isis Aphrodite standing wearing protective chest-bands. Terracotta, Greco-Roman Period, Egypt.



Figure 3.13 Three representations of Isis Aphrodite: two are wearing a high kalathos with the Hathoric disc between horns and one in the middle is wearing a hairdress with grapes. Terracottas. Greco-Roman Period, Egypt.

Hathoric crown (a sun with two horns) is displayed. The *kalathos*, which can assume exaggerated proportions,¹⁷³ is linked to another cult, the cult of Demeter, a Greek goddess of crops and agriculture, with whom Isis was assimilated from the Ptolemaic Period. Indeed, the *kalathos* (*modius* in Latin) was originally used to measure quantities of corn.¹⁷⁴ Isis Aphrodite's hairdress is also sometimes decorated with vine grapes because of her association with Hathor, patron of orgiastic drunkenness. Isis Aphrodite's husband Osiris was assimilated with Dionysus because both these male gods were seen by the Greeks as 'heroes' of civilisation.¹⁷⁵ Therefore when Isis Aphrodite was identified as the wife of Osiris-Dionysus, her association with drunkenness, linked especially to the consumption of wine, became more accentuated.

Isis Aphrodite combined the attributes of Isis-Hathor with the more realistic and feminine body of a Greek goddess. However, most of the terracotta representations of Isis Aphrodite are quite static (Figure 3.13), so, despite the nudity, they still recall Egyptian standing figurines. Indeed, the use of big wigs seems to continue from the fertility figurines of the Dynastic Period, where the wig had a strong erotic and feminine connotation. The ongoing importance of a sumptuous wig as a feminine attribute in the Greco-Roman Period is clearly shown by a



Figure 3.14 Group of ‘Coiffure’ figurines (above) and Isis Aphrodite with elaborate hair-style. Terracotta. Greco-Roman Period, Egypt.

group of terracottas called by scholars ‘coiffure statuettes’,¹⁷⁶ because they only represent a head with a complex hairstyle (Figure 3.14).

Aphrodite also shared other elements with Dynastic fertility figurines: the standing position; the slender waist; and the pubic hair marked with a black triangle. Terracottas of Isis Aphrodite were certainly used in domestic cults, where they could be placed in niches or used as ritual objects and then possibly discarded, as shown by a figurine found broken in many parts (Figure 3.15).¹⁷⁷ This figurine wears a high crown of feathers instead of the usual *kalathos*. The feathered crown is the main attribute of the god Bes and, from the NK, of his counterpart and ‘wife’ Besit. Perhaps, then, Isis Aphrodite had a strong association with Besit as well, and therefore with pregnancy and childbirth.

Isis Aphrodite is therefore the best example of an advanced level of assimilation between Egyptian and Greek mother-goddesses in Greco-Roman Egypt. At



Figure 3.15 Anasyrmene-Besit with feather crown combined with kalathos. This statuette was found by Petrie in Naukratis. It was broken in many parts in ancient times, so it was probably used for a ritual and then discarded. Terracotta. 2nd century BC. Naukratis, Egypt.



Figure 3.16 Anasyrmene-Besit preserved until the chest. Possibly it was part of a piece of domestic furniture. The goddess has a round face, a large breast and an infantile bulla. Copper alloy. Roman period. From Egypt.

the same time, this figure's typology is still very Egyptian because it retains important iconographic elements from Dynastic examples.

In the Roman Period, a group of terracottas have been found that represent an ithyphallic bearded Priapus who wears a modius and lifts his vest showing his phallus.¹⁷⁸ This representation of Priapus is only known from Roman Egypt, and might derive from the motif of the Anasyrmene. Like Anasyrmene, the gesture of Priapus showing his genitals would be both protective and apotropaic. Priapus was known to the Greeks and Romans as the son of Aphrodite and Dionysus. His disproportionately large phallus was defined as *terribilis*, and his statues were put in gardens to scare off evil forces.¹⁷⁹ However, some Classical and Byzantine authors also speculated about his Egyptian origins. Diodorus Siculus claimed that he was the personification of the lost phallus of Osiris,¹⁸⁰ while the *Suda* identified Priapus with the son of Isis and Osiris, Horus.¹⁸¹ Priapus had received a cult in

Egypt since the Ptolemaic Period: Callixinus of Rhodes mentioned Priapus in the context of a procession in Alexandria which was celebrating the Ptolemies (*Ptolemaieia*) in 271–70 BC.¹⁸² In this procession, the statue of Priapus, wearing an ivy crown, was positioned next to those of Dionysus and the Ptolemies. The epigrammatist Hedylus, who wrote under the patronage of Ptolemy Philadelphus, mentioned Priapus in one of his epigrams as a judge of a beauty contest for young women.¹⁸³ Therefore the Ptolemaic Egyptian Priapus became a subject of votive terracottas that have an iconographic, and possibly ritual, connection to those of Isis Aphrodite Anasyrmene.

There is also a clear connection between the Anasyrmene type and the Baubo type: a naked squatting woman, whose terracotta images appeared from the Greco-Roman Period. Unlike the harmonious image of Anasyrmene, Baubo has a robust body, is naked and often has an ugly face. However, she shares with Isis the same crown with a wreath of flowers, the solar disc between horns and, at times, two protective red bands across her breasts.

3.2.2.3 *Baubo*

Scholars have decided to use the term ‘Baubo’¹⁸⁴ or ‘Pseudo-Baubo’¹⁸⁵ for all the images of women that have the following characteristics in common: they are completely naked or, if they are not, they expose their genitals; their body is dwarf-like and the breasts are sometimes sagging; the belly is often protruding, suggesting a pregnancy; and the face is normally ugly, although there are some exceptions to this.

There are many variations of the typology of Baubo, so many that the names ‘Baubo’ and ‘Pseudo-Baubo’ are not accurate terms to describe all of them. Certainly, the name Baubo was considered misleading by Egyptologists because Baubo was a character from Greek traditions which represented an old woman who showed her genitalia to cheer Demeter up when she was sad for her daughter’s loss.¹⁸⁶ The reason why seeing her genitals could have been amusing for Demeter is difficult to explain.¹⁸⁷ However, perhaps in the Greco-Roman world, the meaning of Baubo’s gesture of exposing her genitals was understood in a similar way by Greeks and Egyptians: the showing of genitals provoked laughter in the god Ra when this was done by his daughter Hathor.¹⁸⁸ Indeed, since the Classical Period, Greek travellers like Herodotus could observe Egyptian festivals, like the one of Bastet in Bubastis, during which women lifted their vests publicly. This gesture was capable of inducing laughter in troubled deities. In this way, both Egyptians and Greeks might have considered this gesture a very powerful religious act.

The earliest images of a woman in a frontal squatting position, perhaps in the act of giving birth, are on NK ostraca, pebbles and bread loaves (type 8, Figure 3.8).¹⁸⁹ In the Late Dynastic Period, soft limestone plaques representing roughly carved naked, pregnant women were produced in areas of Egypt inhabited by Greeks, like Naukratis¹⁹⁰ and Memphis.¹⁹¹ Petrie dated them to the 6th–4th centuries BC.¹⁹²

The earliest Baubo terracottas date to the 1st century BC and show a marked association with the cult of Demeter, in particular those with a piglet or wild boar,



Figure 3.17 Baubo sitting on a boar. Terracotta. Roman Period 1st century AD (?). From Egypt.

which was sacrificed during the Thesmophoria.¹⁹³ Baubo is sitting on the animal and has a dwarf-like plump body, sometimes partly hidden by a long veil (Figure 3.17). Sometimes she also wears a tall *kiste* and holds a stela in her left hand, both attributes of Demeter's cult. These attributes, and the association between Baubo and ithyphallic priests,¹⁹⁴ also suggests a mysterious and orgiastic side to these cults: the terracottas could have been used during the mysteries that took place in the Alexandrian district of Eleusis.¹⁹⁵

From the early Ptolemaic Period, semi-naked female figurines were associated with ithyphallic men, and possibly derive from the ritual connection between Isis Aphrodite and Priapus. In a terracotta group from the Temple of Isis, Mother of Apis, in North Saqqara, a goddess is associated with an ithyphallic god with the side-lock of youth.¹⁹⁶ The couple may be Isis Aphrodite and Harpocrates-Priapus. In the Roman Period, this iconography became more complex, showing Baubo being carried on the shoulders of a Satyr¹⁹⁷ or ithyphallic priest. These terracottas have been associated more with the mysteries of Dionysus rather than those of Demeter, even though the cults of Isis-Demeter and Osiris-Dionysus were strongly connected. Interestingly, some Late Period bronze and copper statuettes

show a similar scene: naked women, in one case with a newborn child, bringing Bes on their shoulders.¹⁹⁸ Bes was assimilated, from the Hellenistic Period on, with the Satyr Silenos, with whom he shared a bearded face and ithyphallic body. However, while in Dynastic figures Bes is supported by a naked woman, in the Greco-Roman terracottas it is the ithyphallic male character that supports the naked woman. In these scenes, Baubo is also associated with Herakles's lover Omphale because she is holding a club and wearing a lion skin.¹⁹⁹

Another typology which can be included in this group of 'Baubos' are bronze statuettes of completely naked sitting figures, in a sort of embracing position. These figurines have a child-like body and small breasts. They hold a spherical object in their right hand and a cylindrical object with some lines on it in their left hand; it is probably a spindle in their right hand and a ball of thread in their left (Figure 3.18). Spindle and thread are the symbols of a woman's role as housewife and mother, and some actual spindles and threads have been found in girl's tombs (Figure 3.19).

From the Roman Period onwards, Baubo is represented either sitting or standing up, and performing the gesture of the *orans*, although this should not be regarded here as 'prayer', at least until the 4th century AD.²⁰⁰ Such a gesture can be observed in the Greek world in very early figurines, however, in Egypt it may have developed independently through the symbol of the *ka*, whose hieroglyph represents two outstretched arms. By the Roman Period though, the *orans* gesture is performed by the deceased in various funerary figurines.²⁰¹ The funerary context of this gesture on the figurine suggests that the *orantes* Baubo had a largely



Figure 3.18 Embracing figurine holding a ball of thread in her right hand and a spindle in her left hand. Bronze. 1st or 2nd century AD. From Egypt.



Figure 3.19 Tomb of girl containing a terracotta of Baubo 'orans'. The burial contained spindles, a sphinx, a wooden miniature bed, sandals, many small glass vases, small wooden boxes, combs and vases. The terracotta (UC28002, 25.5 cm height \times 20.5 cm width) is similar to the embracing figures on Figure 3.19: in particular the hair, the position and the child-like body. 2nd century AD. From Hawara, Egypt.

funerary use; a figurine with this gesture, UC 28002, was found by Petrie in the tomb of a girl (Figure 3.19).²⁰²

László Török has compared the iconography and hairstyle of sitting *orantes*²⁰³ to the portraits of Roman empresses, and dated these figurines between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD. Török also noticed that Late Roman *orantes* sometimes wear a bulla, a pendant worn by Roman children. Perhaps the *orans* was sometimes had an infantile nature, through an association with the divine child Harpocrates.

From the 1st century AD, another Baubo typology became widespread in Egypt: the naked Baubo, without any attributes and in a squatting position with open legs. Baubo either keeps her hands on her knees or touches her vulva with her right hand, while she keeps her left leg lifted with the left hand (Figure 3.20). In this typology, Baubo has a plump body, a protruding belly and very marked sexual attributes. It is also worth noting that in this typology, the lower part of the legs is sometimes not represented. This recalls Pharaonic fertility figurines



Figure 3.20 Baubo with open legs. The protruding belly is put on evidence by a big navel which is clearly linked to childbirth, as it can be seen in the wall paintings and ostraca representing scenes of childbirth. It is suggested by the museum catalogue that it is a clay rattle. 2nd century AD. From Antinoe, Egypt.

with protruding bellies,²⁰⁴ where the legs were represented only until the area just under the buttocks.

Less frequently, a Baubo with open legs is associated with Isis Anasyrmene. Baubo-Anasyrmene has the usual squatting position with the legs well spread and the genitals emphasised by a vertical incision. Yet, the figure is not plump but rather has the harmonious body of Isis Aphrodite.²⁰⁵

Both Baubo and Isis Aphrodite are also assimilated with the goddess Besit (Figure 3.16, 3.17), the feminine counterpart of the god Bes, with whom they share the feathered crown. Aphrodite-Besit is depicted in terracottas²⁰⁶ and in elements of furniture,²⁰⁷ while Baubo-Besit is also represented in amulets which could be worn as protective pendants (Figure 3.21a–b).²⁰⁸

3.2.2.4 *Baubo on uterine gems*

From the 2nd century AD, Baubo is also represented on magical gems and *ouroboroi* in association with a representation of the uterus and other figures.²⁰⁹ The figure of Baubo is either represented as a parturient woman sitting on a birthing stool or as a woman washing her genitals with a pot. The *ouroboros* was a gem encircled on one side by a snake biting its tail that represented the uterus as a vase that could be opened and closed through the intervention of magic. The timely opening or closing of the womb was fundamental for conception and birth: indeed, the opening allowed the male seed to enter the womb and the child to be born, while the closure of the womb allowed the seed to be kept and the child not to be miscarried.

There is a vast variety of subjects and inscriptions on these kinds of gem. The materials they are made from are normally jasper, carnelian or haematite, the red



Figure 3.21a (left) Panel painting of a woman in a blue mantle wearing a Baubo pendant. From Egypt, 54-68 AD. Encaustic on wood.

Figure 3.21b (right) Baubo figure. Ptolemaic or Roman Period. Carnelian.

colour of which was connected with blood.²¹⁰ The snake on the gem represented endless time and had a protective function. The human uterus is represented as an inverted cupping vessel locked by a key with a number of teeth, varying from five to seven. The most frequent is the seven-bitted key, and could be linked to the Seven Hathors, the Egyptian 'Fates' that decided on the destiny of the newborn child.²¹¹ Over the uterus-cupping vessel there were two lines, which schematically represented the fallopian tubes. On the fallopian tubes stood protective deities like Chnoubis, Anubis, Isis, Osiris, Nephthys, Khnum, Bes and Horus (but also Greek deities like Herakles).²¹²

The *ouroboroi* representing Baubo are all dated to the 3rd century AD. The inscriptions on the *ouroboroi* often includes the term $\sigma\omega\sigma\tau\iota\sigma\theta$,²¹³ together with other epithets or verbs. This term has been interpreted as Seth-Typhon,²¹⁴ or the uterus itself.²¹⁵

On the Baubo *ouroboroi*, the uterus is represented on each of the two sides of the same gem, but with two different shapes: as an inverted cupping vessel, in association with Baubo, and as an octopus on the other side.²¹⁶ The octopus-uterus is also associated with a scarab and the Greek inscription $\kappa\kappa\kappa$.²¹⁷

The image of Baubo on uterine gems was identified with the Greek mythological figure of Omphale, a queen of Lydia,²¹⁸ who forced the hero Herakles to serve her for one year to expiate a murder.²¹⁹ According to other sources, during this year, Herakles took the spindle and her feminine clothes, and spinned the wool,²²⁰ while Omphale wore his lion skin and held his club.²²¹ The relationship between Herakles and Omphale was generally seen in a negative way in the Hellenistic and Roman Period, because it showed a woman emasculating a man.²²² However,

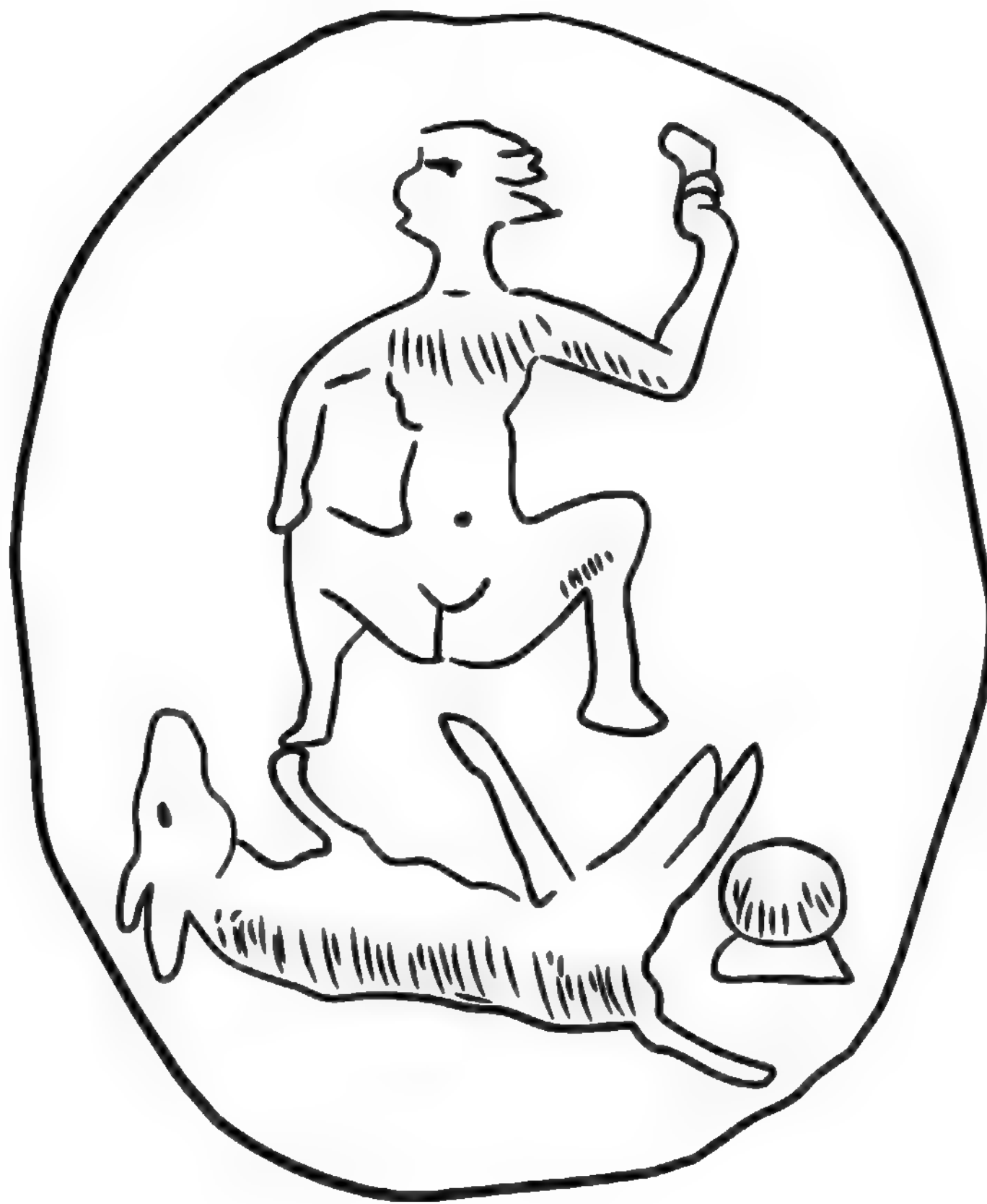


Figure 3.22 Seal impression of ouroboros with Baubo-Omphale squatting and holding a club. The woman is hovering over an ithyphallic donkey with an erected phallus. Next to the donkey there is a small uterus-cupping vessel. 2nd–3rd century AD. From Egypt.

according to Diodorus, Herakles and Omphale developed a relationship based on mutual love and respect.²²³

On CBd-1703 the name Ὀμφάλη (Omphale)²²⁴ is connected to the image of Herakles. On another gem, Herakles appears on one side while wrestling with a lion, while on the other side a woman is sitting on a birthing stool;²²⁵ the parturient has the attributes of Omphale: she is holding a club in her right hand and probably wearing a lion skin. Under Omphale there is an ithyphallic donkey or ass, the animal that represents Seth Incubus (Figure 3.22).²²⁶

The association between Baubo-Omphale and the Sethian ass recalls the story of Isis giving birth to Horus alone in the marshes, while trying to defend herself from Seth. It is evident from this association that there is a link between the representations of Baubo-Omphale on gems and the cult of Isis Aphrodite. However, Baubo-Omphale is not represented as a weak and vulnerable character: she holds a club in a threatening way, and she is associated with her companion Herakles, who fights against the lion on the other side of the gem. But, what is Herakles fighting for in uterine gems, and what does the lion represent in this context?

The figure of Herakles wrestling with a lion is also associated with the uterus-octopus or uterus-cupping vessel, but also with the simple inscription kkk,²²⁷ The

relationship between Herakles and the uterus is shown clearly by a gem representing the hero wrestling the lion over the fallopian tubes of the uterus itself.²²⁸ Dasen argued that this image has three levels of interpretation:²²⁹ Heracles is at the same time fighting the pain caused by labour, protecting the uterus, but also keeping the uterus itself under control; the uterus was believed to be an unstable organ which had to be tamed, guided and protected. If the uterus contracted at the wrong time, it could provoke miscarriage or death in childbirth. In another *ourobros*, Typhon, identified with Seth in the Greco-Roman Period, also threatens the uterus in order to stimulate its timely contraction.

Contract, uterus, otherwise Typhon-Ororiouth will have you.²³⁰

Thus, Seth did not have an exclusively negative function: he is also keeping the power of the uterus under control. This protective function is more evident in gems where Seth is guarding the uterus by standing on the fallopian tubes, where normally Herakles, or other good Egyptian guardian deities, usually stood.²³¹

Baubo is also represented on uterine gems, where she either washes or anoints her genitals with a jug or a pot. There is one terracotta where she is doing this while also wearing the crown of Isis Aphrodite.²³² The women performing this gesture in the uterine gems generally have no attributes though, and are completely naked (Figure 3.23). However, one of these gems has the name Ὀμφάλη (Omphale) inscribed under the image of the woman.²³³

The gesture of washing genitals with a pot could be associated with the purification of women after childbirth, a very private ritual which certainly existed, but has no clear visual attestation, except for the gems and the terracotta mentioned above. This activity also brings to mind the Demotic medical papyri (now in Berlin)²³⁴ which recommended the anointment of the vulva with a protective potion.²³⁵ However, less obvious explanations for this gesture, perhaps linked to some myth or mystery ritual, cannot be ruled out either.

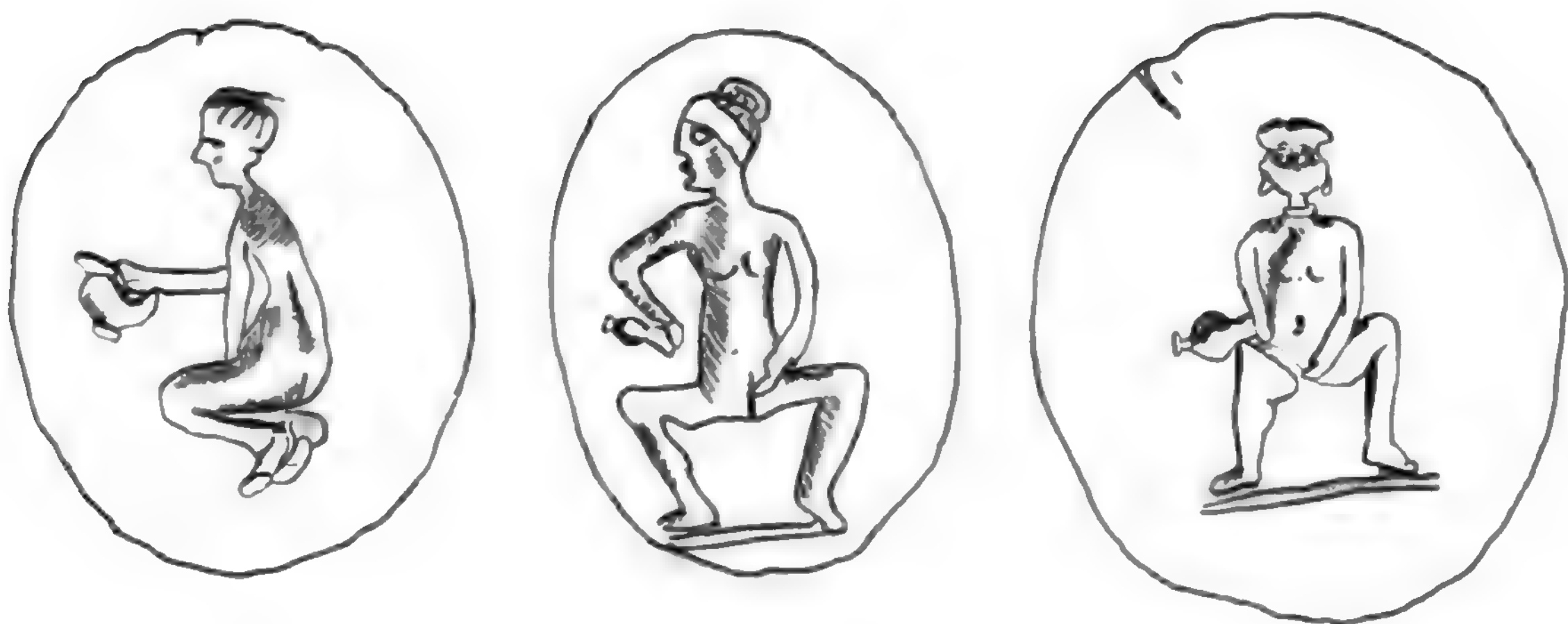


Figure 3.23 Three jasper and magnetite gems with naked women anointing their vulvae with a pot. The gem on the right has the inscription ομφάλε, 'Omphale'. Roman Period. From Egypt.

3.2.2.5 *Drawings of women in childbirth*

In the Dynastic Period, childbirth is depicted only in the hieroglyph meaning ‘birth’, and in temple paintings. Other phases like pregnancy²³⁶ were emphasised in votive images, but scenes of childbirth were not seen anywhere else. Fertility figurines and ostraca representing women in bed with their babies, are the closest one gets to scenes of childbirth from the MK and NK.

The earliest drawing representing childbirth in Egypt comes from a Hellenistic funerary stela found in the Ibrahimieh Necropolis of Alexandria.²³⁷ No Egyptians were buried in this necropolis, only Greek soldiers and their families, and this is reflected in the iconography of the stelae, which are completely Greek, with no apparent influences from Egyptian art. The woman is represented in labour because she died in childbirth. This stela can be compared to other similar Attic stelae produced in the Classical and Hellenistic Periods.²³⁸ It has been suggested that in some parts of Greece women who died in childbirth were compared to soldiers who died in battle.²³⁹ Therefore, childbirth was not depicted merely to show the cause of their death, but also as a way to give them public recognition for their brave attempt to provide offspring for their household and community.

This iconography of death in childbirth does not appear in later tombs, yet attestations of grief for young women remained a strong tradition in Egypt, especially in the culturally Greek areas of the Fayyum. Those particularly grieved for were the young girls who did not have the chance to experience womanhood at all. A 2nd century AD depiction of a woman in childbirth, on the mummy tablet of a girl from Hawara, might attest to this form of sorrow (Figure 2.3). The tablet was found by Petrie in a grave with a mummy and numerous objects:²⁴⁰ the mummy has a gilded and painted plaster mask and a foot case. The mask is a non-realistic portrait of an adult woman whose bust shows fully developed naked breasts; however, the CT scan on the mummy has shown that the girl was not older than 5 to 7 years. The mummy case was wrapped in a linen tissue and covered with a set of objects: mirrors, a statue of a lion, an ithyphallic faïence statuette, some small glass vases and a small wooden box. The painted mummy tablet was placed just above the mummy’s head.²⁴¹ Dasen observed that the mummy tablets were used to identify the dead during their transport to the atelier of embalmers in the necropolis.²⁴² Sometimes they very roughly represented the deceased or protective funerary deities, like Bes, Khnum and Anubis.²⁴³ This wooden tablet has no inscriptions and represents a naked woman, possibly sitting on a birthing stool, with her legs spread and her arms on them. The association with childbirth is also suggested by the pronounced belly and by the large belly button. The woman wears a necklace with a bulla or a *lunula*, and another longer necklace, apparently of pearls, that hangs across the breasts, resembling the Isiac protective chest-bands. The similarity with Isis Anasyrmene is also stressed by her snake bracelets, two for each arm.

The woman could be interpreted as Isis herself, or, less likely, the deceased, possibly deified.²⁴⁴ On the other side of the tablet, a man is sitting on a high chair and holds a pair of shears. While Petrie and others²⁴⁵ had interpreted this man

as a tailor, Bierbrier and Dasen convincingly showed that this man could be a doctor.²⁴⁶ Perhaps the doctor was the father of the woman in labour represented on the other side of the tablet; sometimes mummy tablets indicated the filiation and the profession of the father of the deceased, so the portrait could be a sort of 'visual' patronymic.

The tomb of this girl with its mummy tablet may be compared to the tomb of the girl where the Baubo *orans* terracotta UC 28002 was found (Figure 3.20). Both these tombs were found by Petrie in Hawara, and have been dated to the 2nd century AD. Both the girls were buried with adult women-related artefacts, and with objects representing 'Baubo'. The 'Baubo' image on the mummy tablet (Figure 2.3) in one tomb and the Baubo terracotta in the other (Figure 3.20) have nudity, the position with open legs and the snake bracelets in common. However, the tablet represents the image of a fully developed woman, while the terracotta doll has a very immature body.

The Baubo image on the mummy tablet is clearly not a realistic portrait of the deceased, and even the Baubo terracotta was created with a mould, so it was probably mass-produced for many users. Therefore, the terracotta and the painted wooden tablet simply represent Baubo in two different versions: Baubo in her childish form in the terracotta, and Baubo in her association with Isis Anasyrmene on the wooden tablet. Apart from the typological differences between the two Baubos, it is worth noting that both these young girls from Hawara were still buried with an image of a woman in childbirth. The symbolism of this image is reinforced in both cases by a considerable number of feminine items, a sort of reward for a premature death that did not allow these girls to reach their coming of age and, ultimately, maternity.

I would like to conclude this section about depictions of childbearing women with a discussion of a group of sketches representing naked women giving birth. Two monochrome wall paintings from a 1st century BC tomb chapel in Hermopolis²⁴⁷ represent two scenes of childbirth, which have no precedents in Egyptian popular art. The wall paintings explicitly show two mothers with open legs who have just given birth to a living child, who is still attached to them through the navel cord. The mother below is more realistic than the one above. In the figure below (Figure 3.24), both the mother and the child have a particularly prominent belly button, marked with a large black circle. The child raises his little arms and has its mouth open in what seems to be its first cry. Presumably, the intention of the anonymous artist was to show as lively a baby as possible but, generally it is hard to understand the function of these paintings in a funerary context.

A few images on ostraca present similar images to the tomb paintings from Hermopolis. One of them, UC33253, has been identified as a monkey: however, both the shape of the body and the large circular black belly button suggest that the figure could be a woman giving birth, or being shown soon after the birth. What has been interpreted as a tail could be the first part of her umbilical cord. A Roman ostrakon from Karanis (Figure 3.25) clearly represents a naked woman with a similarly pronounced belly button. Next to the woman, there is a small figure that could be her newborn child. However, the arms of the small figure

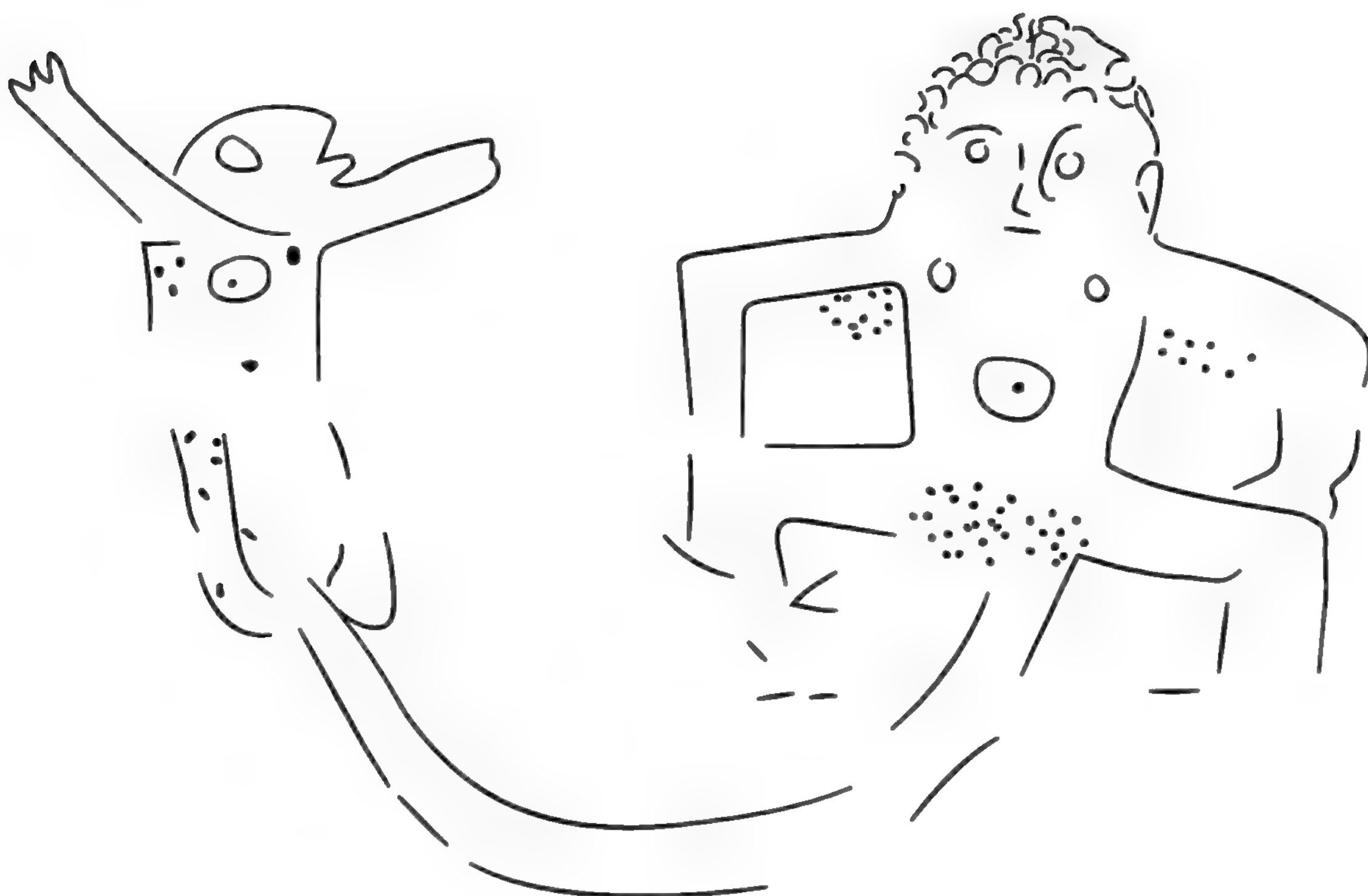


Figure 3.24 Wall painting from a tomb. 1st century BC. From Hermopolis, Egypt.

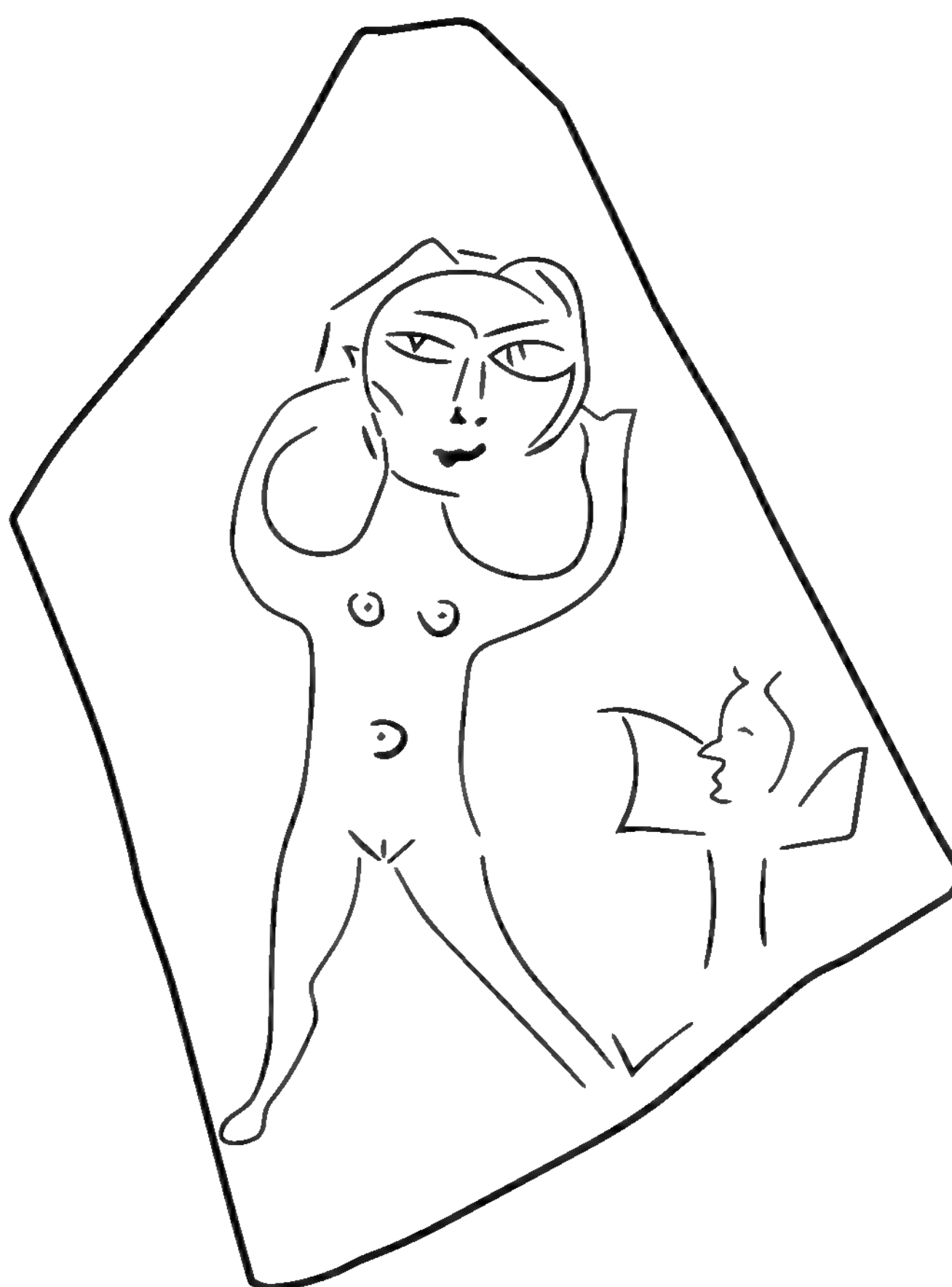


Figure 3.25 Ostracon representing naked woman with marked navel and newborn child (or winged demon). 4th century AD. From Karanis, Egypt.

could also be wings: winged Bes demons were represented next to mothers in confinement.²⁴⁸

3.3 Bes and his companions

Before her popularisation in the Greco-Roman Period, Isis looked after common people indirectly. Indeed, in the MK, she was believed not to come in person to help women in labour at all; instead, she sent an intermediary, a dwarf demon, that in the NK was given the name Bes. This last section of this chapter will examine the iconography and the evolution of Bes, and the sacred spaces where his cult was set up.

Since the earliest representations in the MK, Bes had a female companion, Taweret, a hybrid between a hippo, a lion, a crocodile and a woman, with sagging breasts and a pregnant belly (Figure 3.26). Both Taweret and Bes protected expectant mothers from the moment of conception until childbirth. However, Bes had more practical tasks, since he was believed to actively aid the labour as a sort of ‘obstetric’ god. The devotees of Bes were mainly women who wanted to conceive or to have an easy labour. Taweret also had a protective function for deceased women, as shown by an amulet of the goddess found in a MK tomb of a woman called Hepy (Figure 3.27).²⁴⁹

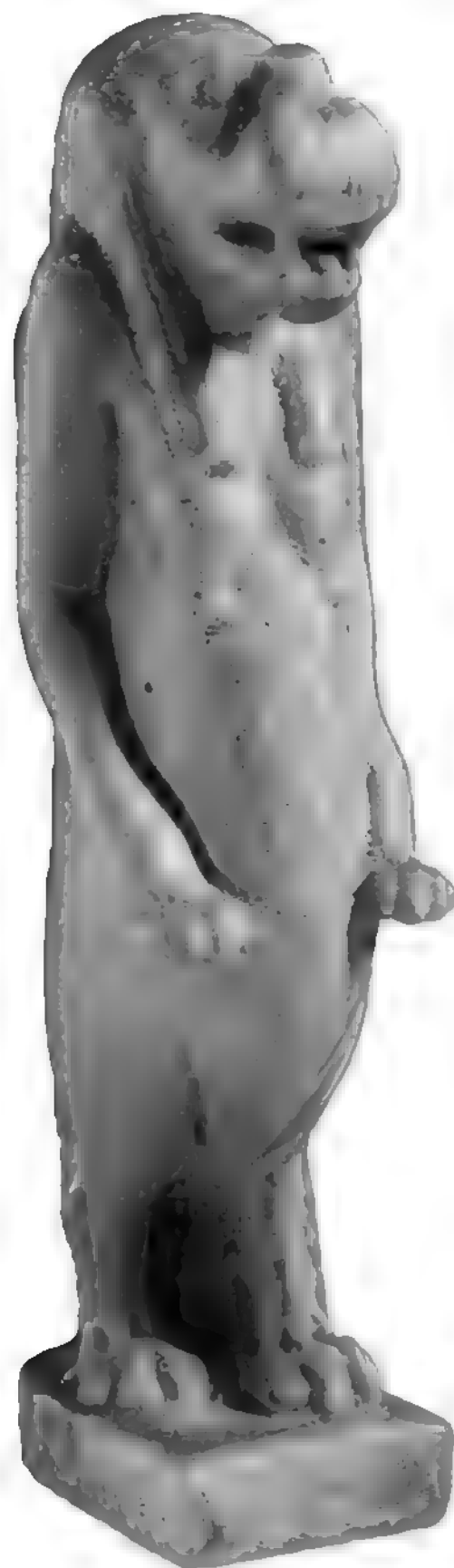


Figure 3.26 Amulet of the goddess Taweret. Faïence. Late Dynastic-Ptolemaic Period. From Egypt.

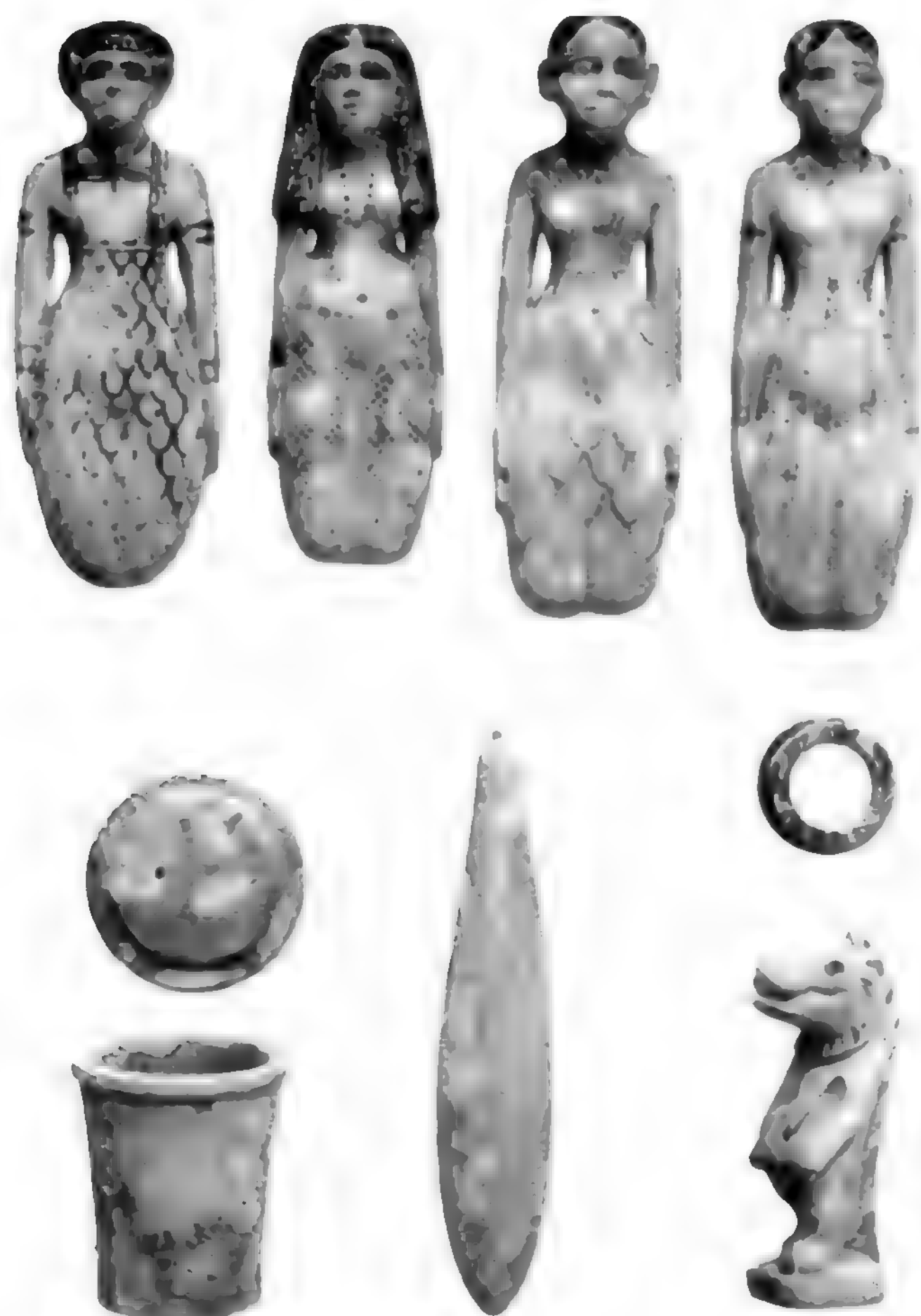


Figure 3.27 Group of objects found in front of the brick wall which blocked the access to the burial chamber of Lady Hepy. The objects include a faïence amulet of Taweret, a glazed steatite ring, an oil jar with its lid, a faïence cucumber or squash (?) and four type 1A figurines (JE 63861–3). Middle Kingdom. From El-Lisht, Egypt.

Bes and Taweret were celebrated with festivals²⁵⁰ and represented on the walls of houses, as can be seen in the paintings of the Amarna houses.²⁵¹ Besides wall paintings, in many village houses dating from the NK until the Roman Period there were permanent installations for their domestic cult. This included platforms for lustration and libations, enclosed beds, altars, and wall niches.²⁵² Vases for libation of water, milk, and later wine, often represented Bes or Hathor.²⁵³ Terracottas of Bes together with other popular deities, like Isis or Harpocrates, were often put in these niches where they received flowers and food offerings.²⁵⁴

The cult of Bes made its first appearance in the domestic sphere in the MK. Scholars are not uncertain about the sources dating to this period, since the god was not called Bes and was not represented as a dwarf, as he was later. However, by the MK, Bes shows features that will be peculiar to him a few centuries later, in particular, the dwarf-like body, the leonine features and his association with female fertility and childbirth.

On Leiden papyrus I 348,²⁵⁵ there is a group of spells aimed at accelerating a troubled childbirth. In two of these spells the goddess Hathor is implored to send to the parturient her intermediary dwarf, in the form of a clay amulet. Bes had received a dwarfish aspect not by chance: real dwarfs had been highly regarded in Egypt since the OK for several reasons. They were believed to have magical powers, especially protective and apotropaic ones;²⁵⁶ in addition, dwarfs were loved because they entertained the king and his court with music and dance.

One of the earliest representations of a god identified by many scholars as Bes, can be found on the apotropaic wands dating to the MK that we discussed above.²⁵⁷ Another object dating to the MK is a mask of Bes made of painted canvas, found by Petrie²⁵⁸ in a house of Kahun village, the modern El-Lahun.²⁵⁹ This Bes mask is unfortunately very fragmentary, but its reconstructed size suggests that it was worn by a mummer, a dancer or a priest who acted the part of the god.²⁶⁰ In a hole in the floor of the same house a wooden masked figurine was found that represented a female magician in costume, with a tail and a pair of ivory castanets.²⁶¹

Another Bes-masked female fertility figurine dated to the MK was found in a MK burial shaft near the temple of Ramesses II at Thebes.²⁶² When Petrie and Quibell discovered and cleared the shaft in 1885–1886,²⁶³ they found many ritual objects, such as ivory protective ‘wands’, ivory clappers, model food offerings, and female figurines. In the same shaft, there was also a box containing 118 reed pens²⁶⁴ and a large number of papyri with spells and medical texts.²⁶⁵ Therefore, this tomb is thought to have belonged to a lector priest.

Both the female masked statuettes from the Ramesseum and Kahun show that canvas Bes masks, like the one found in Kahun, could have been worn by women. This tradition of Bes-masked women can be seen in later periods as well: in the Petrie Museum I found a Late Period faïence amulet which seems to represent a woman wearing a Bes mask (Figures 3.28 and 3.29).²⁶⁶ This amulet suggests a continuity in the tradition of Bes masks and Bes-masked women which is an important revelation. All the three Bes-masked women are naked, so if they were mummers, they performed their rituals without garments, suggesting a certain eroticism. Indeed ritual erotic dances involving ithyphallic dwarfs are attested in Hathoric sanctuaries, such as at Deir el-Bahri.²⁶⁷

3.3.1 *Iconography of Bes and Hathor in the New Kingdom*

In the NK, the domestic cult of Bes became widespread and the iconography was generally canonised. From the NK onwards, Bes also appeared on faïence amulets and tattoos.²⁶⁸ The faïence amulets of Bes continued the tradition of clay dwarfs used in the MK spells.²⁶⁹ However, from the TIP on, Bes increasingly assumed new attributes from other deities: in particular Hathor, Ra, and, later, Harpocrates and Dionysus.

Since the NK, Bes had commonly been represented as a naked or semi-naked dwarf, dressed in a leonine skin, and in a squatting position. His head was over large, maybe because it was originally a mask and not a real face. He often wore a beard and showed his tongue, in order to threaten or to tease the evil spirits who endangered his protégés.

His attributes and iconography varied according to the context in which he was represented. He could simply be standing up, in a semi-squatting position, or could have other attributes like swords.

Although Bes did not look like any animal in particular, the lion skin, the nudity and his wild nature gave him a semi-feral appearance, so his association



Figure 3.28–3.29 Amulet of woman with raised arms wearing a large leonine mask which could be interpreted as a Bes-mask (3.28: front; 3.29: back). The masked woman lifts with both arms (hands are not preserved) a leonine skin which covers the back of her body and leaves the front naked. The identification with a woman rather than a young male such as Horus-child derives from the marked navel and the slender waist. In the back, the woman's long hair is coming out from the mask. The position and the body are similar to the ones of the woman in the ostrakon on Figure 3.25.

with animal cults is understandable. His earliest association with them could be attested in the ibis burials at the site of Qaret el-Faragi (about 500 m from el-Bawiti,): a sandstone statue of Bes was found in the galleries, and a figure of Bes painted red was cut on a wall of the court.²⁷⁰ In the Ptolemaic Anubieion of Saqqara,²⁷¹ an entire room was dedicated to the god.

Another very common iconographic association is Bes with the goddess Hathor, the goddess of love and fertility. Hathor and Bes were the only two deities that were represented in a frontal position in the Dynastic Period. The frontal position

had a clear apotropaic function in many cultures because the deity was believed to be able to face the enemy. The round shape of Hathor's face and her cow's ears were due to her nature of being both a solar and sky goddess: later, Bes himself received a similar round-shaped face.

From the New Kingdom, Seven Hathors decided on the destiny of children.²⁷² Hathor's function as goddess of fate is also mentioned in the temple of Dendera, where she is called the 'mistress of Shai and Renenutet', the lady of destiny and nourishment.²⁷³ Bes is also represented multiplied,²⁷⁴ maybe assuming the function of the seven (or twelve) Hathors²⁷⁵ and of other deities particularly linked to childbirth, midwifery and fate, like the four Meskhenets and the twelve or fourteen Tawerets.²⁷⁶

In NK temples dedicated to Hathor, the face of the goddess is represented as a capital on the columns. The columns had the function of sustaining the ceiling of the temple, which was compared by the Egyptians to the sky. The Hathoric columns were an important feature of the *mammisi*, the Greco-Roman Egyptian temples celebrating Isis or Hathor giving birth. The term *mammisi* derives from the Coptic term *MAṆMICI* 'place of birth' and was adopted by Champollion to indicate a small temple that was normally built next to a bigger one. This temple celebrated the birth of a divine child or the birth of the king identified as divine child.²⁷⁷ In the Ancient Egyptian documents examined by Daumas, the *mammisi* is signified by a variety of terms, the most frequent being *pr mst*, 'the birth house'.²⁷⁸

The presence of Hathoric columns in Greco-Roman *mammisi* suggests an association between these columns and childbirth. The association of Hathoric capitals with childbirth could also be traced back to the MK. In this period, which predates the introduction of Hathoric capitals and columns made in stone, the round face of Hathor was represented on ceremonial standards with wooden sticks. For instance, a pair of Hathoric standards were represented in the birth brick from Abydos at the extreme sides of a scene of childbirth.²⁷⁹ The standards seem to give a sort of sacred frame to this scene. In the NK, wooden standards surmounted by faïence figures of Bes appear.²⁸⁰ Later on, in the NK, both Hathor and Bes were represented as capitals of the columns of temples. Therefore, from the MK until the Roman Period, standard-like and column-like representations of Bes and Hathor delimited the sacred boundaries of domestic spaces and temples. Miniature columns that combined the figure of Bes with the face of Hathor were also used as votive objects (Figure 3.30).

The bedroom was one of the places that was believed to require most of the protection in the house. The association of Bes with the bedroom was very strong since he was closely linked to the protection of sleep, but also of intercourse and conception. Sleep in particular was believed to be a realm beyond reality, where spirits had free access and could endanger people. Therefore, from the TIP, images of Bes showing his tongue were carved on headrests and legs of beds (Figure 3.31).²⁸¹ Bes figures also decorated one wall of the bedroom of the Pharaoh Amenhotep III in his palace at Malqata.²⁸²

Bes is also represented on a wall painting in the innermost chamber of tomb



Figure 3.30 Column-like statue of Bes and Hathor. The standing figure of Bes represents the shaft of the column while Hathor's face is the capital. Bronze. Late Ptolemaic Period. From Egypt.

T99, belonging to Senneferi, an official of Thutmosis III (Figure 3.32). Bes is shown standing next to a column, beyond which a woman is preparing a bed. The column might represent the limits of the bedroom, and, more broadly, the domestic space.

3.3.2 From the column to the sistrum: Bes' role as musician in childbirth

The shape of the Hathoric column is found not only in bedrooms and mammisis, but also in personal objects like mirrors and *sistra*. The *sistrum* was a rattle, originally made of papyrus stems, and the sound it produced was used to invoke and soothe Hathor (Figure 3.33).²⁸³

The *menat* was another personal attribute of Hathor which was used together with the *sistrum* in the cult and probably during childbirth, according to the story of Ruddjedet.²⁸⁴ The *menat* itself was not a musical instrument, but rather the counterpoise of the necklace which was handled while the beads of the necklace were shaken (Figure 3.34).²⁸⁵



Figure 3.31 Four wooden bed feet shaped like Bes who plays a long flute. From Deir el-Medina, Egypt.



Figure 3.32 Tomb wall painting of Bes standing in a bedroom by a woman who is preparing a bed. New Kingdom. From the Tomb of Senneferi (T99), Thebes, Egypt.

Figure 3.33 Bronze arched sistrum with recumbent Hathoric cow with solar disc between her horns. Greco-Roman Period. From Egypt.



Figure 3.34 Bronze menat counterpoise representing the goddess Hathor: the head of the goddess is at the top of the pendant, her 'body' is the cylindrical centre of the pendant. Inside the body of the menat there is another full depiction of Hathor as a naked woman with a Hathoric crown and a papyrus sceptre. The lower circular part of the menat 'body' has a stylised dotted pubic triangle above which there is another unidentifiable figure. Greco-Roman Period. From Egypt.

The correct musical instruments linked to birth-goddesses in the Greco-Roman Period were the angular harp, the lute, the lyre, the double flute (*aulos*), the round tambourine, the cymbals and the castanets. Some of these musical instruments are typically Egyptian, while others were brought from the Near East or imported by Greek travellers to Egypt. These instruments were usually associated with joyful celebrations, as suggested by an austere religious decree from the island of Biga, carved into the shrine that was believed to host a sacred piece of Osiris' corpse:

Do not play the tambourine here, nor sing to the harp and oboe.²⁸⁶

Particularly widespread was the use of the tambourine 'played by goddesses in ceremonies surrounding birth, as in several birth-houses or, at a more popular level, played directly before Bes by naked females'.²⁸⁷ Mythically, the performance of Bes with the tambourine may have evoked that of baboons greeting the daily birth of the sun-god.²⁸⁸ Tambourine skins at the Cairo museum, dated to the Ptolemaic Period, show scenes of musicians playing in front of the goddess Isis.²⁸⁹

In the NK, Bes is represented on ostraca, found in the workmen's village of Deir el-Medina, playing the flute or the lute under the bed where the mother is lying with the newborn.²⁹⁰ At the same site, Bes figures decorate the walls of enclosed platform beds ('salles du lit clos'); they dance, play the double flute or tambourine.²⁹¹ These enclosed beds have been interpreted as birth beds, or alternatively, domestic shrines linked to fertility cults. In a front room of a house in the workmen's village in Amarna, one painting represents four figures of Bes dancing in a row.²⁹²

From the TIP on, links between Bes, conception and music are apparent mainly in bronze and faïence statuettes, or in items of house furniture, especially parts of the bed. He is shown playing the double flute, the lyre, the lute and the tambourine, or he can be seated on the shoulders of male or female musicians who play the double-flute or beat the tambourine. The statuettes were interpreted as votive offerings from women who wanted to conceive children, or who wished to express gratitude for a successful delivery.²⁹³

In Greco-Roman reliefs and statuettes, Bes also sings, with a hand to his mouth. In addition, he is often flanked by dwarfish or full-sized women, and playing music and dancing.²⁹⁴ In the mammisis, Bes is represented attending the birth and playing for mother and child.

In the so-called 'Bes Chamber', a sanctuary found by Quibell in the Anubieion at Saqqara,²⁹⁵ high-relief tall figures of Bes are represented standing, holding snakes and knives. In this case, Bes is not playing or dancing himself but he is surrounded by naked women dancing. Many phallic and erotic figurines were found in the room and nearby, and so this room has been interpreted as a place for the incubation of women who wanted to conceive children.²⁹⁶

In summary, the activity of Bes as musician suggests a fundamental function for music in birth rituals and in erotic contexts. Invocation to deities could have been accompanied by music, and the musicians in the actual birthing room might

have worn Bes masks. The music played by Bes for women in confinement could have been both entertaining and celebrative; entertaining during the long period of confinement, and celebrative when the isolation was finally over after forty days. In the *mammisi*, Bes celebrated the divine newborn by playing an instrument, but the images of Bes playing for the newborn must have mirrored real celebrations; it is likely that the introduction of ‘ordinary’ newborns into society was celebrated with music. In the Greco-Roman era, there was a specific feast, ‘the feast of the fortieth day’, which marked the end of the postpartum period, a delicate phase after childbirth when both mother and baby were still considered in danger.²⁹⁷ Only one letter mentions this celebration, and unfortunately the text is incomplete, so we cannot see whether the feast for the child ever included musicians. This seems very likely though, considering the large amount of Greco-Roman papyri containing contracts in which musicians, dancers, singers and mummers were hired for private feasts.²⁹⁸

3.3.3 *Bes pantheos and the solar Bes*

From the TIP onwards and especially in the Late Period, the cult of Bes changed; the domestic demon slowly transformed into a cosmic deity who appropriated the characteristics of many other gods (Figure 3.35). Thus, some scholars called this form of Bes ‘pantheos’, although the Egyptologist Quack rejected this term, preferring the definition ‘polymorphic’.²⁹⁹ In the Brooklyn Papyrus³⁰⁰ Bes is described as a seven-headed creature and is represented surrounded by flames, in front of a snake-god carrying a newborn child. This image evokes the fight of Ra against the snake Apophis, which represents the cosmic fight of good against evil.

In this period, the cult of Bes spread outside the domestic space and went in two directions. On one side, it was appropriated by the pharaohs who used his popularity for their political ends. On the other, new forms of popular worship appeared, such as the cult of stelae, urban religious festivals and pilgrimages to temples.

From the TIP on, the cult of Bes spread into the urban environment; stelae of different shapes and sizes, representing Bes alone or with Horus, were erected in houses, private gardens or in the courtyards of temples.³⁰¹ The Horus *cippi*, where Bes appears in association with Horus, were particularly popular because they were considered powerful medical talismans.³⁰² The *cippi* represented Horus as a child, standing on crocodiles and holding dangerous animals, surmounted by the round face of Bes. The dwarf’s round face in the *cippi* recalls the solar disc, and suggests that he was represented in this way as a hypostasis of the sun-god Re.³⁰³ As the sun-god, he descended to help Horus and all children in trouble. However, the spells written on the *cippi* had a more specific medical function: they provided protection against ailments caused by venomous animals. Their healing effect derived from drinking the water which had poured down along the *cippus*: the liquid absorbed the magical meaning of the spell and was then collected in a pool at the base of the statue.³⁰⁴ In the same period as the Horus *cippi*, there is a large diffusion of a particular kind of amulet which is, in my opinion, a sort of portable Horus *cippus*. This amulet is a bifacial disc, normally



Figure 3.35 Bronze Bes pantheos with four wings, stretched arms holding standards or knives (not preserved) and an erected phallus. The god wears a *shuti* double-feathered headdress with solar disc and stands over an oval ouroboros with an uraeus.

realised in faïence but also in bronze, which represents the round head of Bes on one side and the eye of Horus on the other (Figure 3.36).³⁰⁵ These amulets might have been used for protection from snakes and scorpions, but also from general medical ailments.

3.3.4 Religious festivals for Bes-Dionysus

In the urban sphere, Bes also received a festival in Dendera called the *Besia*. Unfortunately, it is difficult to say when this festival was established by the population since its only attestation, on a Heidelberg Papyrus, dates to the

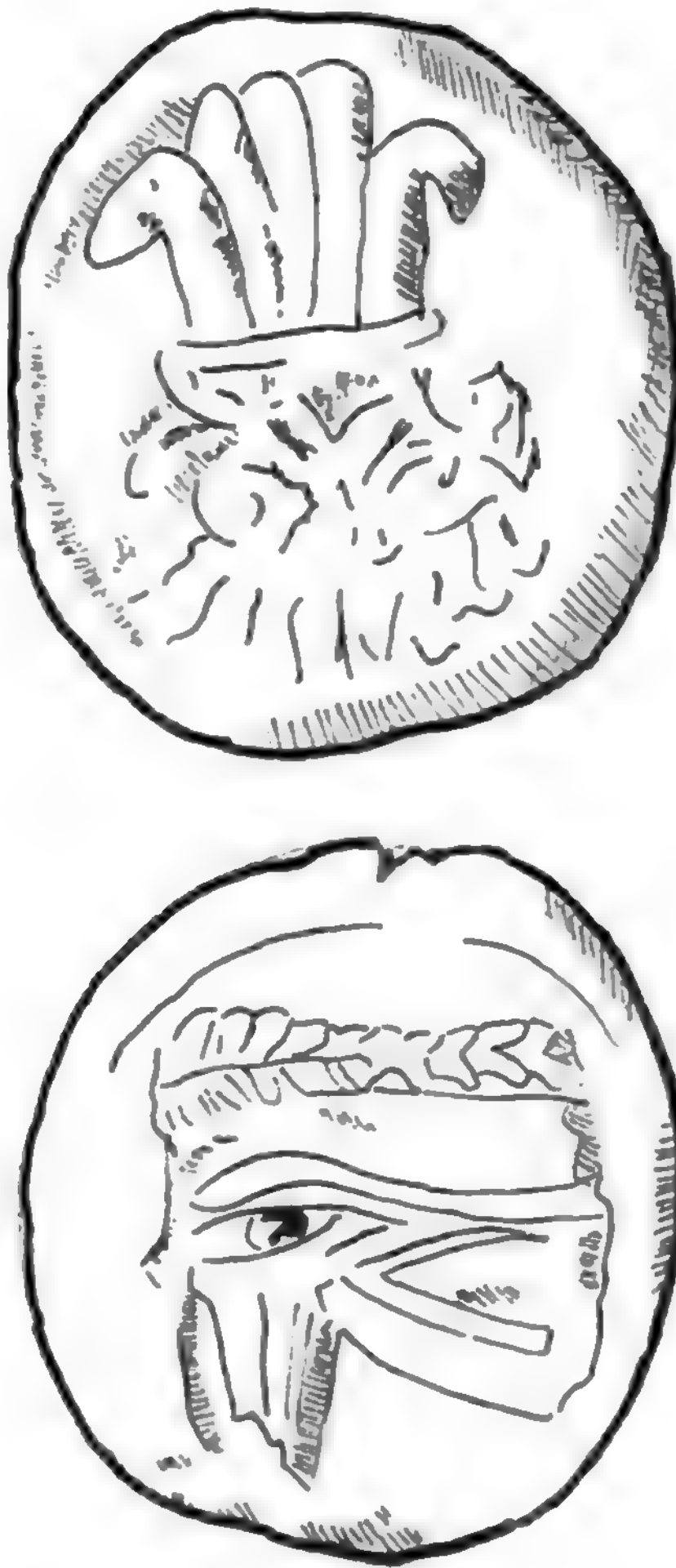


Figure 3.36 Bes/Udjat faience amulet. Ptolemaic Period. From Bakchias, Fayyum, Egypt.

Greco-Roman Period.³⁰⁶ During the *Besia*, as at other festivals, food and votive terracottas were produced; a rare terracotta showing Bes flanked by a jug and two bread loaves, now at the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts, may be an example of such a votive made for this festival.³⁰⁷

Some scholars speculate about a link between the *Besia* and the *phallophoria*, mentioned by Herodotus³⁰⁸ and Plutarch,³⁰⁹ a festival in which a phallic statue was carried in honour of Osiris-Dionysos. A group of terracottas found in the Bes chambers of the Saqqara Anubieion may attest to a festival for Bes.³¹⁰ These terracottas represent two priests and two figures of Bes, or mummers in his guise, carrying a huge phallus; on the top of the phallus sits a dwarfish or child-like figure of Harpocrates with a small creature, a woman or a monkey, seated on his shoulder, beating a tambourine. Six terracotta figurines of Bes carrying a phallus together with priests and with a figurine playing a tambourine, are preserved at the Petrie Museum.³¹¹ The festival possibly promoted female fertility and included music, dance and wine consumption. The link between Bes and wine probably derives from the association made by the Greeks between Bes and Silenus, a creature associated with Dionysus. However, the Egyptians also considered the consumption of alcohol as a way of facilitating lovemaking and conception.

It is not certain whether the *Besia* was only celebrated locally or whether it involved the Bes cultic images travelling to various places, as happened in other traditional events, such as the Opet festival.³¹²

3.3.5 *Mammisis, incubations and oracles*

In the Ptolemaic Period, Bes is represented as protector of Hathor and Isis in the mammisis of Philae and Dendera. Common people were excluded from the inner rooms of the mammisi but many, mainly women who wanted to conceive, started pilgrimages to these buildings. Signs of pilgrimage can be seen in the gouges left on the face of the goddess Hathor in the mammisi of Dendera. This damage can be seen in those areas of temples which were either easy to reach for the general visitor, or because they were considered more powerful; the powder deriving from this gouging was used to prepare healing potions.³¹³

It is possible though that smaller local mammisis were open to people belonging to religious associations. Indeed, the following short letter of invitation suggests that an area within this one could be chosen by religious associations as a meeting place for a symposium:

ἔρωτᾷ σε Νικηφόρος δειπνῆσαι εἰς κλείνην τοῦ κυρίου Σαράπιδος ἐν τῷ
λοχίῳ τῇ κγ ἀφ' ὥρας θ.³¹⁴

Nikephoros wishes to invite you for dinner at the banquet on *klinai* of the Lord Sarapis in the birth temple, on the 23rd starting at 9.³¹⁵

The word used for mammisi here is λόχιον, a term which literally means 'the place of birth', and could therefore be a translation of the Egyptian *pr mst* in κοινή Greek.³¹⁶

In the Ptolemaic Period, the priesthoods of several temples decided to build annexes outside them in order to allow common people to enjoy more direct contact with the deity. In these annexes devotees spent the night, waiting for the god to send a healing dream. Devotees could also receive some healing water in their room, as happened in the chambers of the sanatorium at Dendera. Here, as with the Horus *cippi*, the water acquired a magical power by flowing along the inscribed spells of a stela, and was then led through to the chambers via a complex hydraulic system.

The term 'incubation' means spending a night in a temple in order to receive an oracular dream from a god: it is controversial whether this practice was indigenous or whether it was brought by the Greeks. It became very popular in Greco-Roman Egypt, probably thanks to the association with a traditional Egyptian practice: the oracle. One of the most ancient places for incubation dedicated to Bes could be the mysterious chambers of Bes in Saqqara, excavated by Quibell in the early 20th century.³¹⁷

It is certain that Bes received a place for incubation, as well as a complex class of priests, in the Memnonion of Abydos, the funerary temple of Seti I, in a chapel originally dedicated to Osiris. In the Ptolemaic Period, the chapel was dedicated

to Sarapis, worshipped there as an oracular deity. In the Roman Period, Sarapis was replaced by Bes, as shown by the Greek graffiti of the devotees who visited the temple. The inscription included a *proskunemata*, a thanksgiving for grace received and simple prayers where the name of Bes was repeated. The devotees also wrote their names in order to leave a permanent sign of their existence. A priest wrote a longer inscription, describing his gratitude to Bes(a) for visiting his dreams while sleeping at the temple:

Here slept and saw dreams Harpokrates of holy Panias, a priest, dear descendant of Kopreias the priest, for Besa whose voice is all. And his gratitude is not small.³¹⁸

Among the graffiti, no prayers mention childbirth in particular. However, there is another source, the second story of Setna Khaemwese, that attests to the practice of incubation for barren women. This tale was written down in the same period in which the oracle of Bes was flourishing. Here is the story of the incubation (with the most relevant parts set in bold):

[Setna and his wife Meheweskhe desire a child so she sleeps in a temple and there sees . . . a] dream, while they spoke with her, [saying: ‘Are] you Meheweskhe, [the wife] of Setna, who sleeps here [in the temple] to gain a remedy? . . . When] tomorrow [morning] has come, go to the entrance [of the] cistern of Setna, your husband. There you will find a melon vine growing . . . to them. Break it with its gourds, and grind it. [Make it] into a remedy and put [it in water and drink it . . . You will conceive in a fluid of conception] from him on that very night.’

Meheweskhe awoke [from] the dream, with these being the things that she had seen. She acted in accordance with [every]thing / [that she had been told in the dream. She lay down] beside [Setna] her husband. She conceived in a fluid of conception from him. Her [menstrual cycle] came, [and she showed] evidence [of a woman who has conceived. It was announced to Setna, and] his heart was very [happy] on account of it. [He] bound [on her an] amulet, and he recited for her a spell.³¹⁹

From the 3rd century AD, pilgrims no longer needed incubation to receive oracular dreams and priestly interpretations. Priests began to create ‘popular’ versions of the traditional religious texts which had never been accessible to commoners before. As a consequence, religious rituals could potentially be performed anywhere and by anyone. Priests composed corpora of oracular texts³²⁰ and oracular decrees that could be worn as amulets. For instance, a decree by Min and Isis promised the wearer that she would conceive healthy male and female children and that she would have an easy delivery.³²¹ In another decree, a triad of gods protected the wearer of the amulet from miscarriage, from having twins, which was regarded as unlucky or particularly hazardous, and from any problem while giving birth.³²²

Despite the availability of domestic oracles, the oracular centres of fertility gods like Bes and Isis, remained prosperous until the 4th century AD.

3.4 Preliminary conclusions

This chapter has provided a survey of the large body of evidence related to birth rituals in Ancient Egypt. The modern reader would assume that domestic rituals related to birth were performed in almost every house, albeit infrequently; and indeed there were spells and objects which were used at the time of a woman's labour. Yet, the deities that were invoked to protect the mother in childbirth were also those that were believed to supervise other daily, more frequent activities, such as sleep, illness and intercourse. It is also evident that birth rituals became an important part of activities in *mammisis*. In the funerary sphere, birth rituals were closely associated with rituals of rebirth; each person at the moment of death was believed to become a fragile newborn again, and thus needed ritual support to move into the afterlife.

A positive and open dialogue between the living and the dead was also an important aspect of birth rituals; mothers who had a miscarriage needed to appease their stillborn before they could hope for another birth. Families wrote messages to their deceased kins on female figurines to have a birth granted. Dynastic female figurines seemed to have a role that went beyond the birth rituals themselves, as they have been found in many different archaeological contexts. Their bodily attributes and decoration show an evident connection with motherhood, female beauty, fertility and with the cults of Hathor and Isis, but also with the Phoenician Astarte (type 4). Type 4 figurines have beautiful wigs and sometimes a simple diadem. However, the lack of divine attributes such as a solar crown or a sceptre suggests that all these figurines do not represent any particular goddess. There are even more generic figurines which have no attributes at all (1B); not by chance perhaps, they survived well into the Roman Period as such examples could have been used in a large variety of rituals.

In the Late Dynastic Period, new cults and new iconographic types appeared in areas populated by Greeks. By the Ptolemaic Period, new techniques were brought as well, and terracotta became the most popular material for votive figurines. However, some terracottas maintained a connection with Dynastic types. In particular, Greco-Roman terracottas of Isis Aphrodite and Baubo had recognisable attributes from earlier examples, but still represented female deities only allusively, like Pharaonic fertility figurines. This suggests either a possible identification between the owner and the image, or perhaps a magical and apotropaic use.

The new Greco-Egyptian Isis Aphrodite type brought with her all the Hathoric attributes, and merged them with those of various Greek goddesses. In the Isiac Baubo type, the slender body of Isis was made dwarfish or child-like, becoming the counterpart of popular male deities with the same characteristics: Bes, Harpocrates and Greco-Roman popular ithyphallic deities, like Pan or Priapus. From the Roman Period, uterine gems provided a new means of representing the relationships between these female and male deities.

The male element in Egyptian birth rituals and, more generally, in fertility and apotropaic cults, is often identified with the god Bes. His cult evolved through the centuries alongside the cult of Hathor, with whom he shared function and attributes; both these gods were assimilated with other Egyptian and Greco-Roman deities (e.g. Bes-Ra and Bes-Dionysus; Hathor-Isis and Hathor-Isis-Aphrodite). The cult of Bes appeared in houses in the MK, then in public urban spaces in the Late Period, and finally beyond the urban environment in the Greco-Roman Period, with the institution of the mammisis and the oracle of Abydos. In the MK and NK, Bes was the helper of women in labour: he defended the space by throwing knives and guarding the boundaries, and entertained women with music. In the Greco-Roman Period, the sacred space for the cult of Hathor and Bes was monumentalised into the mammisi; in this temple, Bes assumed a fundamental importance as protector of the birth goddess herself. In addition, Bes received, for the first time, a sanctuary at Abydos, where he could ‘visit’ his devotees in their dreams.

The monumentalisation of sacred spaces for Bes not only reflects a change in religious beliefs, but also an appropriation by priests of this popular cult, which gave temples prestige and created new possibilities for pilgrimage. Nevertheless, despite all these changes, the cult of Bes still maintained its character of private devotion: a dialogue between devotee and deity, protected by the intimacy of dreams and domestic walls.

Notes

- 1 Cf. the MK spell where Hathor is asked by the parturient to come to her pavilion: Borghouts 1971: 30. Cf. Psyche’s invocation to the birth goddess Iuno Lucina in Apu., *Met.* 6.4.1–4: ‘magni Iovi germana et coniuga . . . quam cunctus oriens Zygiā veneratur et quam omnis occidens Lucina appellat sis in meis extremis casibus Iuno Sospita meque in tantis exanclatis laboribus defessam imminentis periculi metu libera. Quod sciam soles pregnantibus periclitantibus ultro subvenire.’: ed. S. Gaselee 1915 in <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Apul.+Met.+6.4.1&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0502>. Last accessed: 3 July 2018.
- 2 Steindorff 1946: 41–51; 106–107; Hayes 1953. Robins 1993: 72ff. Toro Rueda 2006: 40–45. Szpakowska 2008. Teeter and Johnson 2009. Marshall 2015: 130–132.
- 3 Berlin Museum inv. 14207; Toro Rueda 2006: 43.
- 4 Berlin Ägyptisches Museum 14207. Tr. in French by Marshall 2012: 131; all the translations in French by Marshall are translated into English by the author.
- 5 BM EA65439. Tr. by Marshall 2015: 131; translation modified by the author.
- 6 MM 08.200.19.
- 7 English translation available from the Metropolitan Museum online catalogue.
- 8 Steindorff 1946, 50.
- 9 Hayes 1953: 249. Comparison with similar practice in Africa in Feucht 2004: 46 and note 81.
- 10 MM 22.1.65. Tr. by Marshall 2015: 131.
- 11 Cairo JE9346. Tr. by Marshall 2015: 131, modified by the author. See also: MM 30.8.218 (fig. 3.1), MM 15.3.197 and Cairo JE9434.
- 12 Robins 1993: 87.
- 13 Roth 1992: 113–142. This article presents childbirth as a metaphor for rebirth in the afterlife in the rituals of the opening of the mouth.

- 14 Kelsey Museum: 3844; Gly: 206 n. 210.
- 15 Stol 2000: 121. See Chapter 2.
- 16 See section 2.1.2.3. Crum 1942: 69.
- 17 The Coptic Apocalypse of Elijah uses the word in this passage: “The midwife of the land will mourn then, and she who has given birth will look heavenward, and say, ‘Why did I sit on the brick to bring a child into the world?’”: Stol 2000: 121.
- 18 *Wb.* V, 553.7–554.18.
- 19 *Wb.* II, 148.6–14; *FCD* 117; Lesko, *Dictionary* 2 I: 242; *Ptol. Lexikon*: 465.
- 20 See Chapter 2.
- 21 Papyrus Berlin 3027, chap. F (5, 8–6, 8). Erman 1901: 26. Yamazaki 2003: 24.
- 22 Tablet I, preserved at the British Museum with the accession number ME 78941. Lambert, Millard and Civil 1969: 31–32. Text published *ibid.*: 63, line 15, as K 3399+3934 (S) Obverse iii. In the original Akkadian text, p. 62, the birth brick is called *ladittu*, the woman is defined as *harištu*, ‘pregnant’ but also ‘polluted’, and therefore here translated as ‘in confinement’. See section 5.3.
- 23 Wegner 2006: 35. Marshall 2015: 85ff.
- 24 Possibly goddesses, because the gods in Egypt were believed to have hair made of lapis lazuli. Marshall 2015: 85.
- 25 Roth and Röhrig 2002.
- 26 As for instance in the tombs of Tutankhamon and Horemheb. Roth and Röhrig 2002: 121–139.
- 27 O. Gardiner 863, 8–11 in Szpakowska 2003. See, for instance, the 18th Dynasty clay cobra from the British Museum, EA 55594.
- 28 First register, western wall, line 48, 5–9. Tr. in German by Kurth 2004. English version by the author.
- 29 Tr. by Borghouts 1978: 42, n. 66.
- 30 Roth and Röhrig 2002: 131.
- 31 Tr. by Lichtheim 2006: 114.
- 32 Papyrus Brooklyn 47.218.2 (x+iv, 7 – x+v, 2), Late Dynastic Period, probably from Elephantine, edited and translated in French by Guermeur 2016. See also section 6.3.2.2.
- 33 Guermeur 2016: 23. English translation by the author.
- 34 See a complete survey by Szpakowska 2011: 63–76.
- 35 P. *Chester Beatty* VIII. Borghouts 1978: 10–11, n. 11. ‘He has conjured his place, his room, his bed. He has conjured the four noble ladies . . . To chase away any male enemy, any female enemy, any male dead, any female dead . . .’.
- 36 BM 10059 Section IX Incantation 28 = Wreszinski 1912, Incantation 40, and BM 10059 Section IX Incantation 30 = Wreszinski 1912, Incantation 42. This spell prescribed the use of an ibis made of clay (hby n sin) which was applied to the bleeding wound: Waraska 2009: 162–163 for more discussion on the figurines of clay.
- 37 P. *Chester Beatty* I. Lichtheim 1976: 214–223.
- 38 te Velde H. 1967: 57–59. See his discussion on the Egyptian literary tradition on the cutting off of the testicles of Seth.
- 39 Nunn 2003: 98.
- 40 Tr. by Borghouts 1978: 38, n. 59. The spell does not seem to be ‘against the semen of a demon’ as Borghouts points out. It seems to be using the poisonous strength of the seed against the dead spirits. That also explains the use of Horus’ seed.
- 41 *Apul. Met.* 7.21; 10.20–22.
- 42 Dasen 2008b: note 39.
- 43 Iles-Johnston 1995.
- 44 Stol 2000: 177.
- 45 Iles-Johnston 1995: 377–378. Dasen 2008b: 14.
- 46 Westendorf 1999: 422–424. Dasen 2008b: 19, note 54.

- 47 Hp., *Nat. Mul.* 15, 16, 18 (trad. Littré, VII, 333–335, 337, 339), *ibid.*, 90 (Littré, VII, 409); *ibid.*, 103 (Littré, VII, 419).
- 48 My translation from the German: ‘Ein anderes (Heilmittel). Ein lbs-Fisch, der . . . salbe ihre Vulva damit, und man soll ihre Tür ihres Hauses damit besprengen’: Westendorf 1999: 424. *P. Berl. Dem.* (S.53f. nr. 15): lines 3–4 and 29–30.
- 49 My translation from the German: ‘Ein anderes (Heilmittel). Herz von einem männlichen (?) Esel, das gekocht ist. Salbe . . . und besprenge das Innere] des Hauses damit’. Westendorf 1999: 424. *P. Berl. Dem.* (S.53f. nr. 15): lines 3–4 and 29–30.
- 50 Bussière and Lindros Wohl 2017: 368.
- 51 *Ibid.*: 369.
- 52 Wrede 1968–1969: 83–93. Dasen 2015: 3858–3871 (Kindle location).
- 53 *Ibid.*; Myśliwiec 2004: 89.
- 54 Montserrat 1996: 30, fig. 4. Discussed in 3.2.2.5.
- 55 Dasen 2015: 3858.
- 56 The 14-week foetus was found in the roof rubble of the upper room of House 4, Rm 7B. After Frankfurter 2006: 44 fig. 1a and b.
- 57 Papyrus Brooklyn 47.218.2, x + III9–IV2. Marshall 2015: 38–39.
- 58 Pinch 1983: 405–414; Pinch 1993: 198–208.
- 59 Waraska 2009.
- 60 Backhouse 2013.
- 61 Waraska (2009) includes the Late Period but only for her group of figurines from the precinct of Mut.
- 62 Waraska (2009: 12) and Pinch (1993: 223) are aware of the continuity of some types into the Hellenistic and Roman Period but they choose not to include Greco-Roman figurines in their studies.
- 63 The study by Morris (2011) gives a useful archaeological context to the NK paddle dolls.
- 64 See note 59. My type 1 broadly relates to Pinch’s type 1; my type 2 to Pinch’s types 4 and 5; my type 3 to Pinch’s type 6 and my type 4 to Pinch’s types 2 and 3. Pinch 1993: 198–208.
- 65 Pinch dedicates three sections to materials that are related to female figurines: 1) pebbles representing the female body; 2) a group of golden plaques from Faras; 3) models of breasts and genitals from Deir el-Bahri: Pinch 1993: 209–211.
- 66 Type 5 large hip figurine UC 30096 mentioned by Petrie 1921: 60, pl. LII.425; type 6 plaques mentioned in Backhouse 2011; Type 7 ostraca in Bruyère 1939; type 8 pebbles in Keimer 1940; type 9 paddle dolls in Morris 2011; type 10 rag dolls in Janssen 1996.
- 67 Pinch 1993: 199. Type 1A figurine JE 47710 was found in tomb 508 in Asasif. Morris 2011: 80, fig. 3. Type 1B figurine UC 16148 was found in the 12th Dynasty tomb of a woman named Satrenenutet at Hawara.
- 68 Pinch 1993: pl. 46a, UC723–724.
- 69 Pinch 1993: 199.
- 70 Ivory: WAM 71.505, 71.522, 71.1130; wood: MM 26.7.1416; limestone: MM 22.2.34.
- 71 See for example MM 22.2.34.
- 72 As noticed by Pinch 1993: 198.
- 73 1A: E 10942.
- 74 1B: UC 16148, WAM 71.522.
- 75 1A: UC 16725; 1B: UC30093.
- 76 WAM 71.1130.
- 77 E 10942.
- 78 Capel Markoe 1996: 65, n. 13.
- 79 Dots: JE 47710 = fig. 3.2; scarification: BM 52863.

- 80 A necklace: WAM 71.522; two crossed chest-bands: WAM 71.505.
- 81 Pinch 1993: 204–207.
- 82 Pinch's type 5 were especially from temples. More than seventy findings come from Deir el-Bahri and eighteen from Faras, but isolated votive offerings also come from Mirgissa, Gebel Zeit, Dendara and the foundations of the temple of Tutmosis III at Koptos, and Amenhotep II at El-Kab: Pinch 1993: 223.
- 83 Corresponding to Pinch's type 4. Bruyère 1939: 141; Backhouse 2013: 27–28.
- 84 Pinch 1993: 230–231. 12 examples from the Theban area, Sawama and Zawiyet el-Aryan.
- 85 Pinch's type 5 is smaller than type 4, being 3–6 cm on average; some of the simpler specimens might have had an amuletic function suggested by the hole for the suspension. Pinch 1993: 206.
- 86 Pinch 1993: 204.
- 87 Pinch's type 5, EC 875.
- 88 Pinch's type 4, Robins 1993: 57, fig. b; Waraska 2008: 225 no. 39.
- 89 Pinch 1993: 49b = BM 51263; E 16513c, e, h.
- 90 Pinch 1993: 49a = BM 41107 and BM 41108.
- 91 Pinch 1993: 204. She also mentions an unprovenanced example with preserved hair, discussed by Bresciani 1975: 12.
- 92 Bruyère 1939: 139, pl. XLIII, group of figurines above (n. 1) and XLIV group of figurines above (= E 16513c, e, h). Unfortunately the author gives no precise date for the houses.
- 93 There are striking similarities between Pinch 1993: pl 50b and Pinch 1993: 51d.
- 94 See examples in the previous footnote.
- 95 Except for a limestone example from Geneva (MAH 017860) which is only 2.3 cm.
- 96 UC8649.
- 97 Pinch 1993: 51d; EC446.
- 98 BM237; UC30188; EC 447.
- 99 UC 30188; UC 8651.
- 100 UC 8650.
- 101 NK models: E 27261, UC 24513–24514, MEL 2006.0.159, EC 446. Late Dynastic models UC8648, 8652, MAH 017860.
- 102 For instance the Egyptian garrison of Beth Shean (Israel). See an example from Beth Shean similar to type 3 at the Penn Museum, inv. 32–15–197.
- 103 Pinch 1993: 47b = BM 23424.
- 104 E 27257, E 27262, E 27263, E 27264.
- 105 M.80.202.27.
- 106 M.80.202.129, UC 59289, UC 59290.
- 107 BM WA 104477, 139438.
- 108 Many type 4 figurines from Gebel Zeit types are from Louvre (E 27257, E 27262, E 27263, E 27264). Information about their provenance: http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=23735. Last accessed on 3 July 2018.
- 109 Pinch 1993: 213–214. However, type 4 figurines were also found in tombs and houses, so should not be considered exclusively as temple votive offerings.
- 110 UC 7129, UC 7404.
- 111 BM 6459; UC 59276; UC 59280.
- 112 BM 6459 is painted and with genitals; UC 59279, 59281, 59275 only feature genitals and not decoration.
- 113 Pinch 1994: 194, fig. 67 = BM 23071.
- 114 Cairo Museum CG 25074. Ostrakon of a pregnant woman found in the tomb of Ramesses IX (KV 6), Valley of the Kings. Manniche 2006: 102–103.
- 115 Morris 2011. But she also mentions examples that come from Lahun and Rifeh.
- 116 The paddle doll was associated with 'a wooden figure of a Bes dancer holding snake

- wands, a metal snake wand, three ivory apotropaic wands, part of a different type of wand decorated with lions, a pair of ivory hand-shaped clappers, baboon and lion figurines, and five type 1 fertility figurines': Pinch 1993: 217. See 3.2.1.10 and 3.3 for further discussion about the objects of this tomb.
- 117 UC 30096; M.75.62.17 and Bruyère 1939: pl. XLV (third row from above).
- 118 UC 30096: 21.05 cm × 8.45 cm.
- 119 This date is suggested by the Petrie Museum for UC30096, which was found by Petrie in Upper Egypt in a funerary context: Petrie 1921: 60, pl. LII.425.
- 120 Bruyère 1939, pl. XLV. Suggests that they date to the Middle Kingdom.
- 121 Ibid.
- 122 Bruyère 1939: XLIII, 2 (second and third row from above) and XLV (second group, first row from above). See also E 16507: 6.9 cm; E 16508: 8.5 cm in Backhouse 2013: 27–28, fig. 2.8, 2.9.
- 123 See Brunner-Traut 1970.
- 124 See 3.3.
- 125 Keimer 1940: 45b, pl. VII. These pebbles are called 'tricks of nature' by Keimer. Most of them are found in the workmen's huts near the Valley of the Kings.
- 126 Bruyère 1939, pl. XLV.
- 127 Keimer 1940: 8–9, Pl. VII. The ones found by the huts were dated to the end of the Ramesside Period.
- 128 Pebbles representing women were found in the NK temple of Hathor in Mirgissa, and pebbles resembling mothers and children were found in the temple at Timna. However, Pinch also mentions a possible OK antecedent: a group of decorated pebbles offered in the temple of Satet at Aswan: Pinch 1993: 209–210.
- 129 Tristant 2012: 42, fig. 29. See Chapter 4 for further discussion about these figurines.
- 130 Pinch 1993: pl. 33b. BM 41100.
- 131 Pinch 1993: pl. 52c. From in Deir el-Bahri like the amulet.
- 132 BM 47766 = Pinch 1993: 52b, 1.7 cm long; BM 47767, 1.9 cm long. BM 47768 = Pinch 1993: 52b, 3 cm long, is a faïence model of phallus found in Deir el-Bahri.
- 133 Bruyère 1939: pl. XLIII, XLV.
- 134 1A: see UC 16725 and Capel and Markoe 1996: 65, n. 13. Type 1B: UC 30093, MM 22.2.34.
- 135 Derchain 1975: 55–74.
- 136 Pinch 1983: 405–414.
- 137 BM 23424.
- 138 UC 59289, UC 59290.
- 139 'Wochenbettfrisur'. Brunner-Traut 1955: 26–27. However, Pinch (1983: 405–406) does not agree with this interpretation because she has noticed other images of young women with the same hairstyle that are not associated with the context of childbirth. In her opinion, the tripartite hairstyle was merely a fashion for women in the NK.
- 140 Desroches-Noblecourt 1953: 7–47.
- 141 JE 47710 was found in the 11th Dynasty tomb 508 in Asasif and UC 16148 was found in the 12th Dynasty tomb of a woman at Hawara.
- 142 Pinch 1993: 212.
- 143 Pinch 1993: 221. Type 2 corresponds to Pinch's types 4 and 5.
- 144 'Placing the figurines in vicinity of a higher power, such as a deity or a transFigured spirit, charged them with *heka*, to act as fertility charms at all stages, from conception to the rearing of infants.': Pinch 1994: 225.
- 145 Backhouse 2013: 36–37. Votive figurines representing animals or human beings were broken and discarded after rituals in other traditions, such as in the Aegean culture. Cf. Haarmann 1996: 72–73.
- 146 For the healing of a snakebite and a stomach ache, respectively: Waraska 2009: 162.
- 147 Waraska 2009: 169.

- 148 Pinch 1993: 212.
- 149 Bleeker 1973: 59.
- 150 Although Pinch (1993: 214) rightly suggests that they might be dancers, even though they are not represented in the act of dancing.
- 151 Davies 1920: pl. 23A. Pinch 1993: 213.
- 152 The theories about the wrapping were presented by Pinch 1993: 224–225.
- 153 Berlin 14517 = Desroches-Noblecourt 1953: 34–36, fig. 14; Watterson 1991: 76.
- 154 From the Louvre Museum, E 8000 = Desroches-Noblecourt 1953: 37–40, pl. 4; Pinch 1993: 218. The expression of ‘an offering which the king gives’ is a formal one to avoid appealing to the *ka* of the deceased directly. The relationship between the Tita and the deceased Khonsu is unknown. Marshall 2015: 37.
- 155 The wooden female figurines with Bes masks from the Ramesseum tomb (Manchester Museum acc. n. 1790) and from Kahun, are in Bosse-Griffiths and Griffiths 2001: 58, fig. 3–4. Faïence amulet of a woman wearing a Bes mask. Late Dynastic Period. Petrie Museum UC 10682. The catalogue does not specify the provenance, which is probably unknown. The woman has straight legs, a slender waist and a pronounced belly button.
- 156 Many Tanagra-style terracottas were also found in Naukratis: Thomas and Villing 2013: 96.
- 157 Dunand 1990; Fischer and Zachmann 1994; Török 1995; Bailey 2008; Boutantin 2014.
- 158 Török 1995: n. 210, pl. CX.
- 159 See for example BM 1888,0601.111.
- 160 Cf. BM 1886, 0401.1543.
- 161 BM 16026.
- 162 Török argues that they could have been offered in temples as fertility ex votos: Török 1995: nn. 202–209, pl. CVIII–CIX.
- 163 Dunand 1984: 263–270; Dunand 1990: 125–138, nn. 327–363. Myśliwiec 1994: 385–389.
- 164 Hdt, 2.60.2; D. S. 1.85.3.
- 165 P. *Chester Beatty* I, 3.10–14.3. Gardiner 1932: IV.2. Cf. Simpson et al. 2003: 94.
- 166 Kinney 2008: 166. Morris 2011: 86.
- 167 Bleeker 1973: 39–40, 83. Morris 2007: 220.
- 168 The exact provenance and date are unknown, but this figurine is very similar to other Late Dynastic figurines found in Naukratis. In particular a terracotta figure plaque with a nude woman in relief dating c. 550–400 BC, now at the McLean Museum & Art Gallery, Greenock, 1987.375. Also see BM 16026.
- 169 See Thomas: https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Thomas_Figurines_SF_AV.pdf.
- 170 Asasif tomb 518 (JE 47710), NK. Morris 2011: 79–80, fig. 3.21.
- 171 Pinch 1993: 212.
- 172 BM 1893,0915.7 and MFA Museum Boston 01.7741.
- 173 KM 6532.
- 174 Walker and Bierbrier 1997: 163.
- 175 Plu. *De Iside*, 13. ‘One of the first acts related of Osiris in his reign was to deliver the Egyptians from their destitute and brutish manner of living. This he did by showing them the fruits of cultivation, by giving them laws, and by teaching them to honour the gods. Later, he travelled over the whole earth civilizing it without the slightest need of arms, but most of the peoples he won over to his way by the charm of his persuasive discourse combined with song and all manner of music. Hence the Greeks came to identify him with Dionysus.’ Tr. by Babbitt 1936: 35–36.
- 176 Gly: 163–164, nos. 158–163. Bailey 2008: nos. 3121–3129.
- 177 BM 1888, 0601.111.
- 178 BM 37490 and Kelsey Museum 6527.

- 179 Bonnefoy 1992: 139–142.
- 180 D. S. 3.6.3.
- 181 *Suda*, ΠΡ. E. Adler 1928–1938: π, 2276: <http://www.stoa.org/sol-entries/pi/2276>.
- 182 Work of Callixenus of Rhodes entitled ‘On Alexandria’ and reproduced by Athenaeus. *FGrH* 627. Austin 1981: n. 219.
- 183 *AP* 6.292. Pomeroy 1984: 76.
- 184 Olender 1985: 3–55; Richardson 2005.
- 185 Nachtergaele 1995: 274–275; Török 1995: 132–133, no. 190.
- 186 Nachtergaele 1995: 274–275; Török 1995: 132–133, no. 190. Baubo appeared for the first time in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter (HH 2 185–205. Cf. Foley 1994: 12, lines 98–205), where she is called Iambe instead of Baubo. In this, the goddess Demeter was grieving for the loss of her daughter Persephone and had adopted the appearance of an old woman, living as a servant in a wealthy house in Eleusis. Demeter was sitting and grieving for a long time, so a woman called Iambe, started joking with her. Demeter was cheered up, and relieved, for a moment, from her constant grief, and decided to accept some *kykeôn*, a nourishing drink made with flour. In later traditions, Iambe was called Baubo, a goddess whose cult is attested in Greece in association with Demeter. Clement of Alexandria (*Fragmentum Orphicum* 52 = Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.21) specified that Baubo was an old woman who showed her genitalia to cheer Demeter up.
- 187 Morris 2007.
- 188 Ibid.
- 189 Keimer 1940: 45b, pl. VII.
- 190 BM 1965, 0930.954; JE TR20/9/27/25. Cambridge E.SU.146 might be from Naucratis. JE SR5/6442 was acquired in Alexandria.
- 191 UC 38346.
- 192 Petrie 1886: 40, pl.19.4.
- 193 The iconography of this type derives from Hellenistic Greek terracottas of Eros sitting on a wild boar (3rd–2nd century BC). See for instance: BM 1839,1109.29; 1847,0806.84–85; 1859,0216.25.
- 194 Dasen 2008b: 279, fig. 15–16.
- 195 The mysteries are mentioned by Tacitus as dedicated to the god Sarapis: Tac. *Hist.* 4.83. A Roman papyrus attributes the mysteries of Alexandria to Demeter, in relation to the Attic mysteries: P. Oxy. XXVII 2465 Fragg. 3 Col II (2nd AD). Finally, the Alexandrian Eleusis is mentioned in a 3rd century BC epigram of Posidippus: P. *Mil. Vogl.* VIII 309 (Alexandria, 3rd century BC), col IV 1–6, p. 45. Tr. of Posidippus by Austin and Bastianini 2001: 42–43, n. 20.
- 196 E.14.1969.
- 197 Cf. UC 33603–4–5.
- 198 Brooklyn 37.921E. Cambridge E.6.1937.
- 199 Dasen 2008b. See section 3.2.2.4.
- 200 Nachtergaele 1995: 272–273; 2009: 76–78; Bailey 2008: 43–45. Sandri 2012: 638.
- 201 BM EA57358; Walker and Bierbrier 1997: 142, pl. 94.
- 202 Cf. Török 1995: 127.
- 203 Török 1995: nn. 170–180, pl. XCIII–XCVII. All of them were acquired in Egypt, but their provenance is unknown.
- 204 Louvre Museum E16507.
- 205 Cf. Gly: 129–130, nn. 112–113.
- 206 BM 1888,0601.111.
- 207 E.3.1853.
- 208 BM 1871,0616.22.
- 209 The uterine amulets have mostly been studied by Bonner (1950) as well as and later on by Aubert (1989) and Michel (2001a, 2001b, 2004). Over a third of the

known magical gems, about 1,100 from over forty collections, are now included in a database: the ‘Campbell Bonner Magical Gems Database’, designed by scholars of the Universities of Chicago, Fribourg, and by the Museum of Fine Arts of Budapest: <http://www2.szepmuveszeti.hu/talismans2/>. Objects from the database are henceforth indicated with ‘CBd’.

- 210 See a discussion about the properties of the magical gems in Dasen 2015: 798–1060 (Kindle location).
- 211 Michel 2001a: 220, n. 350.
- 212 Ibid.
- 213 Another inscription that appears in these magical gems are the Greek vowels αηιουω, and other names like Ἀβρασάξ and ιασχαρζας, which are difficult to interpret: CBd-1701; CBd-759.
- 214 Griffiths and Barb 1959: 371, note 43.
- 215 Bonner 1950: 85. Around the edge of CBd-225, the inscription: ορωριουθιαωσαβαωθσταλητιμητρα is translated in the database as ‘ορωριουθ, Ἰάω, Σαβαώθ’: ‘Uterus, contract!’
- 216 CBd-758; CBd-759; BM 2010, 5006.585.
- 217 The scarab was a symbol of regeneration and rebirth, but also a powerful protective amulet, so it should not be surprising that it was represented to protect the uterus. The protective function of the scarab is particularly clear on CBd-225, where it is depicted with outstretched wings above the uterus-symbol, in the shape of an octopus. For a κκκ ouroboroi associated with parturient women see CBd-759; BM 2010, 5006.585; CBd-760.
- 218 Dasen 2008b.
- 219 S. Tr. 248–251; D. S. 4.31.6.
- 220 Lucian, *Dialogues of the Gods*, 13. Tr. by Fowler 1905.
- 221 Tertullian, *De Pallio*, 4.3. Tr. by Hunink 2005.
- 222 For instance Plutarch compares Cleopatra to Omphale, and depicts her as a strong woman who dominates Antony to the point of emasculating him, in his comparison to the lives of Demetrius and Antony. Plut. *Comp. Demetr. Ant.*, 9.3.3.
- 223 D. S. 4.31.8.
- 224 The name Omphale is not a meaningless one, because ὀμφαλός means navel in ancient Greek. Therefore, the name could also be associated with the women’s navel in this context. As shown above, the navel was an important feature in the representation of pregnant women, and was particularly prominent in childbirth scenes. The term used for navel in the Hebrew language was a metaphor of the female genitals, so there may have been a similar correlation in Egypt. Dasen 2008b: 272.
- 225 CBd 760.
- 226 Michel 2001a: 247 n. 389. Similarly, on gem CBd-1703, where the woman in labour is identified by the name Omphale, on the other side of the gem there is an ithyphallic donkey.
- 227 All the gems with kkk have been grouped together by Michel under the name Kolikamuletten, because these amulets they had the function of relieving the pain of labour (and maybe more generally a stomach bellyache not necessarily related to childbirth). The three Ks could may also relate to Kok Kouk Koul, a spirit that was also invoked in a magical papyrus to cure fever. Michel 2001a: 247, 390. Michel 2004: 281, n. 23.1.a, pl. 77, 1.
- 228 Dasen 2008b: 272, fig. 9 a, b. Michel 2001a: no 86; Michel 2004: 281, n. 23.2, pl. 77, 2.
- 229 Dasen 2008b: 272.
- 230 Faraone 2003: 196. Dasen 2008b: 18 and note 53.
- 231 Griffiths and Barb 1959: 38, fig. c, d.
- 232 Gly: 130 n. 113, 2nd century AD. Nachtergaele 2003: 186.

- 233 CBd-1703.
- 234 Westendorf 1999: 424.
- 235 See above 3.1.3.
- 236 The lack of realistic representations of childbirth in the Dynastic Period may suggest a possible taboo in Ancient Egyptian society. However, there is not enough evidence to be sure of this.
- 237 Funerary stela with a woman in childbirth. Late 4th–early 3rd century BC. From the Soldiers’ Tomb, Ibrahimieh necropolis, Alexandria, excavated in 1884. Limestone, paint. MM 04.17.1.
- 238 MM 24.97.92 and Athens National Archaeological Museum, NM 749. See Venit 2002.
- 239 Tritle 2004: 88.
- 240 Dasen 2008a: 42, note 10.
- 241 Petrie 1911: pl. XIV.
- 242 Dasen 2008a: 42. They could be written in Greek or in Demotic, and they normally indicated the name, the filiation and the town of the deceased; sometimes there were more details concerning the age, the profession of the deceased or of his/her father. In the bilingual inscriptions the Greek part identified the deceased while the Demotic version used a traditional Egyptian religious formula.
- 243 Dasen 2008a: 45.
- 244 Dunand 1973 discusses the interpretation of Baubo figurines as images of the deified deceased.
- 245 Bowman 1996: 111.
- 246 Walker and Bierbrier 1997: 82. Dasen 2008a: 50–56.
- 247 Montserrat 1996: 30, fig. 4.
- 248 See the ostrakon from Deir el Medina at the Berlin Staatliche Museum, inv. 21451. Dasen 1993, fig. 6.
- 249 The burial chamber itself was untouched, but the objects were found just outside the brick wall which closed the entrance to the tomb. Lansing 1934: 34ff. and figs 28–29.
- 250 I will discuss the festival for Bes later. A popular festival for Taweret is clearly mentioned in Ostrakon Gardiner 166, and from a Ramesside hieratic ostrakon from Deir el-Medina: Toivari-Viitala 2001: 134. Wilkinson (2013: 338) also comments on the action of the men of Deir el-Medina ‘making themselves pure for Taweret’ as a practice linked to the menstruation and/or childbirth of their women.
- 251 Kemp 1979: 48, fig. 1.
- 252 An excellent discussion and bibliography on Egyptian domestic religious practices can be found in Stevens 2009.
- 253 Cambridge E.GA.6188.1943. More Bes vases: Cambridge E.3.1984; E.20.1971; More Hathor vases: Cambridge E.GA.6191.1943; E.GA.6027.1943; E.561.1939; E.GA.4569.1943.
- 254 Stevens 2003: 151; notes 38, 40.
- 255 Borghouts 1971: 30.
- 256 Dasen 1993.
- 257 See 3.1.1.
- 258 Petrie 1904: pl. VIII.
- 259 Borghouts 1971: 40; Toro Rueda 2006: 27–28. See for example in papyrus Ebers 811, a spell for the breasts of Isis in Khemmis. The mother is identified with the goddess Isis in labour.
- 260 Bosse-Griffiths and Griffiths 2001: 58.
- 261 Petrie 1904: pl. XIV. Bosse-Griffiths and Griffiths 2001: 56–58, fig. 2–4.
- 262 Manchester: 1790.
- 263 Quibell et al. 1898: 11 and pl. 3.2.
- 264 Manchester: 1882.

- 265 The Ramesseum Papyri: Barns 1956; Gardiner 1955; British Museum catalogue: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/online_research_catalogues/rp/the_amesseum_papyri.aspx.
- 266 UC 10682.
- 267 Pinch 1993: 213, pl. 54.
- 268 Graves-Brown 2010: 118. A NK bowl represents a female lute player with a Bes tattoo on her right thigh: <http://www.rmo.nl/english/collection/highlights/egyptian-collection/female-lute-player> accessed in July 2017.
- 269 A MK 'clay' dwarf made of faïence: Cambridge E.60.1984.
- 270 Fakhry 1950: 28–29, fig. 12, pl. 12b.
- 271 Quibell 1907.
- 272 Spieser 2011 offers a discussion on the attestations and functions of the Seven Hathors and the Four Meskhenets. She also shows that the Seven Hathors are preceded by the attestation of Seven Cows with a *menat* counterpoise in chapters 141 and 148 of the Book of the Dead. When the Seven Hathors appear in the NK, the Seven Cows survive but become more associated with Hathor. The Four Meskhenets appear later than the Seven Hathors in the Ptolemaic Period. However Meskhenet had been associated with fate since the Dynastic Period.
- 273 Two aspects of fate were personified as a masculine deity (Shai) and a feminine deity (Renenutet). These two deities were at the service of Hathor: Spieser 2011: 73.
- 274 See for instance BM 1178, a limestone stela with four figures of Bes each brandishing a sword. Late Period.
- 275 In the Late Period mammisi of Ain Muftilla, Bes is associated with seven women who could have represented the Seven Hathors: Manniche 2013: 224.
- 276 Dasen 1993: 56 note 14.
- 277 Daumas 1958: 161, 376.
- 278 Daumas 1958: 513–519.
- 279 Wegner 2006: 35. Marshall 2015: 85ff.
- 280 BM 27375. New Kingdom. From Tuna el-Gebel.
- 281 Dasen 1993: 73.
- 282 Manniche 2013: 211.
- 283 Indeed, in the myth of the goddess, Hathor lived in the Nubian Desert as a ferocious lioness, and the world suffered from the lack of love and music. Her father Re decided to bring her home with the help of Thoth and Shu, who gave her a magic potion and promised her a life with music, dance and happy drunkenness. Then a group of Bes-gods calmed and delighted the goddess with their musical performance. After her return to Egypt, she became a cat, and mistress of sex and childbirth. Manniche 1991, p. 117; Dasen 1993: 79.
- 284 See above 2.1.
- 285 Manniche 1991: 45.
- 286 Manniche 1991: 118.
- 287 288 Dasen 1993: 78.
- 289 Manniche 1991: 65.
- 290 Ostrakon from Deir el-Medina (12cm width × 15 cm height) showing a mother who is suckling her baby. The mother is sitting on a large bed and is assisted by a maid, who gives her a mirror. Under the bed, three Bes-like demons are playing music with a lute, and they scare the enemies off with knives. Berlin Staatliche Museum, inv. 21451. After Dasen 1993, fig. 6.
- 291 Dasen 1993: 71.
- 292 Wall decoration of House 3 at el-Amarna. Kemp 1979: fig. 1.
- 293 Dasen 1993: 73.
- 294 Dasen 1993: 74.
- 295 Quibell 1907.

- 296 Pinch 1993: 440; Dasen 1993: 75.
- 297 Olson 1925: 164–167, Perpillou-Thomas 1993: 13–14; Montserrat 1996: 34. See section 5.3.
- 298 Cf. P. *Corn.* 9 (Philadelphia, 3rd century AD) = R.216. In this contract a woman hires a castanet dancer, together with two other dancers, for a six-day festival in her house: Tedeschi 2011: 69–70 n. 11.
- 299 Quack 2006: 176: ‘I would propose replacing the term “pantheos” with the more neutral expression “polymorphic deity”. It has the advantage of avoiding an *a priori* decision about the meaning and function of the deities depicted.’
- 300 Brooklyn 47.218.156. Sauneron 1970; Quack 2006.
- 301 Frankfurter 1998: 47.
- 302 Toro Rueda 2006: 48–52. Cf. Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts Inv. 96.1-E.
- 303 Piankoff 1964: 91, 151, no. 25; Dasen 1993: 64.
- 304 Borghouts 1978: 83–84.
- 305 Cf. numerous Bes/Udjat amulets from Bakchias, Fayyum in Nifosi 2009.
- 306 P. *Heid.* inv. 1818; Youtie 1951: 189, 201, no. 8; Youtie 1973; Perpillou-Thomas 1993: 73–74.
- 307 Inv. T.506 (Coll. P. Arndt). Frankfurter 1998: 126–128, pl. 13.
- 308 Hdt 2.48.
- 309 Plut., *De Iside* 13.
- 310 Dasen 1993: 81; Meyboom and Versluys 2005: 202–204.
- 311 UC 33596–33601. From Memphis.
- 312 Lloyd 2010: 265.
- 313 Frankfurter 1998: 51–52; Lloyd 2010: 271.
- 314 P. *Coll. Youtie* 1 51, Oxyrhynchos, 2nd–3rd century AD. See Husson 1986: 89–94.
- 315 My translation. Cf. Husson 1986: 89.
- 316 Husson 1986: 89–94.
- 317 Quibell 1907; Dasen 1993: 75; Pinch 1994; Dunand 1997: 81 and note 71. The most up-to-date discussion and bibliography is found in Manniche 2013: 226–228 and note 71.
- 318 Pedrizet and Lefebvre 1978: n. 528.
- 319 London, BM 10822 Vo (Egypt, AD 47). Tr. Simpson et al. 2003: 472.
- 320 Frankfurter 1998: 179–180. In particular, as I mentioned, in Chapter 1, the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, are also called the *Predictions of Astrampsychos*. These are a collection of oracular questions concerning private life events, like childbirth and marriage: Rowlandson 1998: 282–284, R218. For marriage: R249.
- 321 Pinch 1994: 169 and fig. 16.
- 322 Ibid.

4 The liminal status of the unborn and the newborn child Greco-Roman Egypt

The previous chapter examined various domestic cults aimed at protecting pregnant women and their children. The uterine gems also showed to what extent the uterus was believed to have unpredictable contractions, which could affect the health of the woman and the foetus. In this chapter, as in the previous two, I am still dealing with pregnancy, but I will move the focus from the mother to the unborn and newborn child. The status of unborn and newborn children in Greco-Roman Egypt was liminal:¹ unborn children belonged to an invisible world, difficult to interpret and even more difficult to control; the foetus was often considered similar to a plant that would become human at a certain gestational stage, or after birth. The child's liminal condition lasted after its birth: it was existentially liminal because its life was at risk; psychologically liminal, because the child had not yet acquired a fully rational mind; socially liminal, because the child was born but was still dependent on its mother's body for breastfeeding; and legally liminal because the child was not part of its family until it received recognition from its father.

This 'liminality' also refers to the unresolved ethical debate on the nature of unborn and newborn children, something that continues to be extremely controversial as it concerns not only children, but also women's right to have control on their bodies. Talking about the status of unborn children is not just a philosophical matter without consequences; it impacts on whether the abortion or giving away of a child is something socially acceptable or not within a particular culture. These issues were as debated in the past as they are today.²

4.1 The unborn in Dynastic Egypt

The Egyptians were aware that the conception of children happened through sexual intercourse. In Dynastic texts, the intercourse which brings conception is defined by the expression 'joining of the interiors', where 'interior', both for males and females, is expressed by the Egyptian word *ib*, or 'heart'.³ The interior of the man is 'placed towards' the woman, and the interior of the female has to 'open up' in order to allow conception to happen.⁴

In the story of Setna Khaemwese, Setna's wife is no longer barren thanks to a prophetic dream, but she actually conceives by having intercourse with her husband:

She lay down] beside [Setna] her husband. She conceived in a fluid of conception from him.⁵

In the Ptolemaic text P. *Jumilac* XII, 22–25, the male semen is described as a fluid that was formed in the father's bones.⁶ Once in the mother's womb, the male seed formed the bones, the spine and the marrow of the embryo, while the mother's milk contributed to the formation of its soft bodily parts.

In the NK Great Hymn to the Aten, inscribed on the west wall of the tomb of the courtier Ay at Amarna, it is the god that shapes the semen into a child inside the mother's womb:

shpr m3yw m hmwt
ir mw m rmt
*s'nh s3 m ht n mwt.f*⁷

You who cause the sperm to grow in women,
 who turns seed into people,
 who causes the son to live in the womb of his mother⁸

Two Egyptian words used for uterus were *hmt* and *idt*.⁹ The general word to indicate the place for the foetus was *ht*.¹⁰

The formation of the child in the uterus is compared in religious texts to the forming of a vase on a potter's wheel. The main god who had the task to form the child was Khnum, but the goddesses Meskhenet and Heqet had a similar role as well.¹¹ For instance, in Berlin Papyrus 3027, Meskhenet was invoked as the personification of the hand of Atum, the first creator of all the living beings:

May you invigorate yourself, may you be active, Meskhenet, because you are a totality, the hand of Atum that generated Shu and Tefnut. This creator has gone away, knowing that in your name, Meskhenet, you will create the ka of this child who is in the womb of this woman.¹²

The unborn child was called¹³ *hy*,¹⁴ *hrd*,¹⁵ *wn.w*.¹⁶ The unborn child was also compared to a chick in the egg.¹⁷ In a 12th Dynasty story, 'A Dispute between a Man and His Ba',¹⁸ a woman was devoured by a crocodile in a lake together with her children. Her husband expressed his grief for the children:

I grieve for her children broken in the egg(s), who have seen the face of the crocodile before they have lived.¹⁹

The children 'broken in the eggs' could be the woman's young children who were born but did not have time to live for long, or it could be a way to define unborn children who were still in her womb. It could even be a reference to potential children that the woman could have conceived if she had lived longer, although this is less likely because Egyptians did not show any awareness of the existence of ovaries and fallopian tubes.

It is not specified in Egypt how long the foetus took to develop, but the metaphor of a chick in the egg suggests that Egyptians believed in a gradual formation of the child. It is in the early stages that the egg needs particular protection, as shown in this sentence from Spell 148 of the Coffin Texts, which refers to the protection of the unborn Horus from Seth. Atum speaks to Isis, who has just realised she is pregnant with Osiris' child:

May that villain who slew his father not come, lest he break the egg in its early stages, for the Great-of-Magic [= masculine, possibly Atum himself] will guard against him.²⁰

Nyord's analysis of procreation in the Coffin Texts shows that the egg was not a metaphor to define the womb itself; rather the egg was contained inside the womb. The womb produced the egg and then protected it. The egg had the function of nourishing the child and containing it while its body was forming.²¹ The forming of the child is described both in the Pyramid and in the Coffin Texts, as a process of 'tying the child inside the egg'.²² In the Pyramid Texts, the child that needs to be tied together inside the egg has no legs and no arms,²³ which suggest that he needs to remain in the egg for full maturation.

By the end of the pregnancy, the foetus was believed to acquire the appearance of a fully formed child. This is suggested by various representations of foetuses *in utero* on ostraca and papyri (Figure 4.1).²⁴

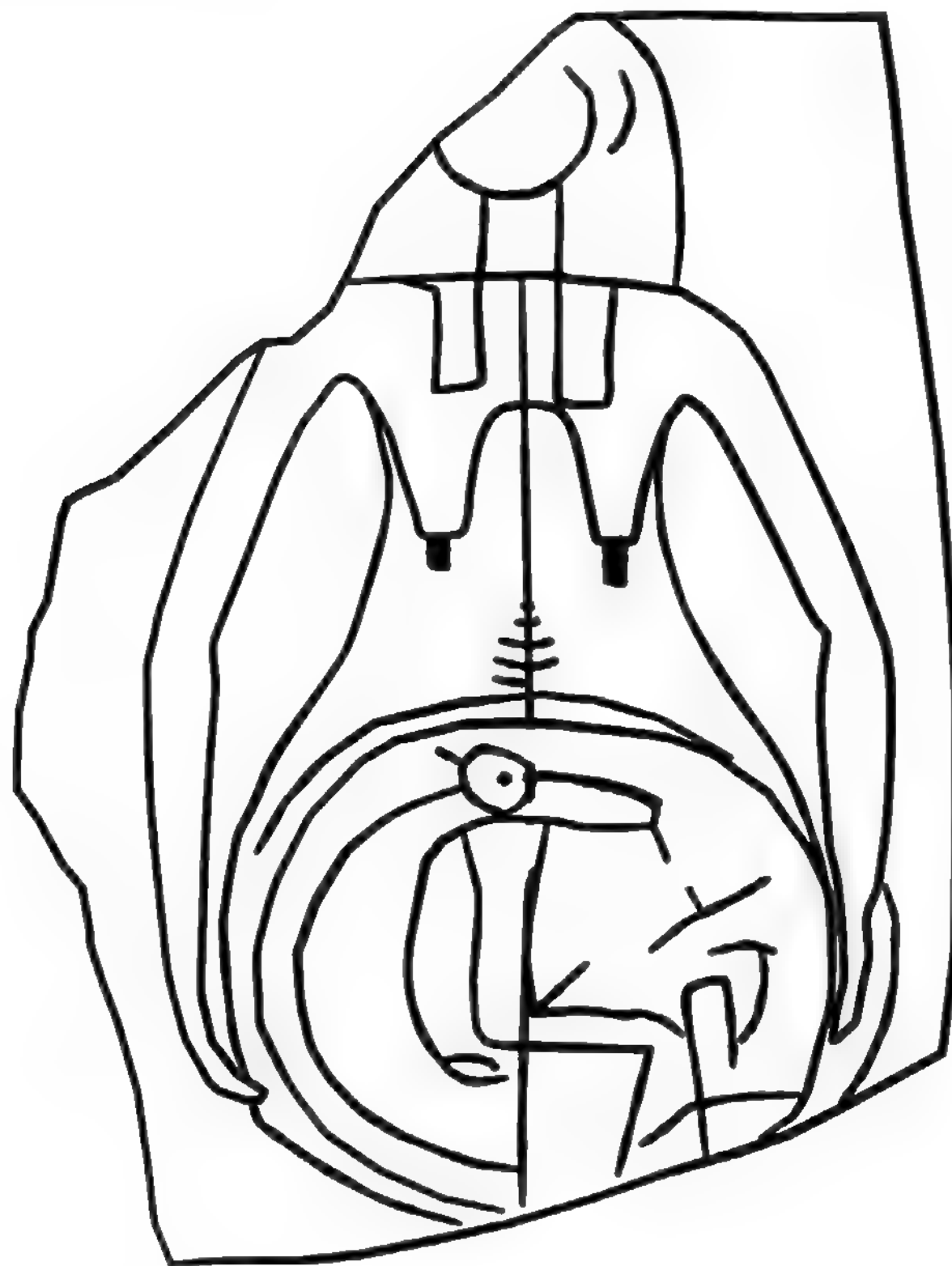


Figure 4.1 Ostrakon representing the sun-god in the womb of the sky goddess Nut. The body of Nut is shaped like a menat counterpoise (Manniche 2006: 101). New Kingdom. From the Valley of the Kings, Egypt.

Some Late Dynastic amulets of the Udjat Eye have a pupil that resembles an egg. In some of these amulets there is a tiny image of Bes, that has been interpreted as an identification between Bes and the solar god Amun-Re in his embryonal stage.²⁵ This image of Bes as an embryo in the egg-pupil might explain the meaning of the Bes-Udjat disc amulets, where Bes is represented within a round shaped object in association with Horus on one side, and with the Udjat Eye on the other.

In the Hymn of Amarna²⁶ there is also evidence that foetuses were believed to have feelings, and were even able to shed tears:

sgrḥ sw m tmt rmy.f

[Aten] who silences him [the foetus] in stopping him crying.

A few lines below, the Hymn suggests that Aten makes the foetus a sentient being, who is able to initiate its own birth:

*iw t3 m swḥt mdw m inr
di.k n.f t3w m-hnw.s r sḥnh.f
ir.n.k n.f dmdy.f r sd.s m swḥt
pr.f m swḥt r mdt r dmdy.f
šm.f ḥr rdwy.fy pr.f im.s*

When the chick in the egg speaks in the shell,
you give it breath within to cause it to live,
you have made him, he is complete, to break out from the egg,
and he emerges from the egg to speak to his completion,
and walks on his legs, going out from it.

However, a few lines before this it is also says that the foetus breathes for the first time on the day of its birth:

*mnḥt m ḥt dyw t3w r sḥnh irt.f nb
h3.f m ḥt r tpt hrw msw.f
wpw.k r.f ḥr kd
ir.k ḥrt.f*

Nurse in the womb, who gives breath to cause all he has made to live,
when he goes down from the womb to breathe on the day of his birth,
you open his mouth in form,
you make his needs.

The latter passage suggests that the Egyptians believed that all the child's bodily functions, even its emotions, derived and depended on its mother until the moment of birth. This belief is also implied in a Ptolemaic text about the role of Khnum in labour, from the temple of Esna:²⁷

[Khnum] relieves the pain and lets the throat breathe to revitalize the 'chick' in the mother's bosom.²⁸

The need for protection for the unborn is explicitly mentioned in a NK spell for the mother and the child, where the unborn is named:

 Their protection [of the gods] comes for NN [the mother] and P. [the child] she protects.²⁹

This overview of the medical and religious ideas concerning the unborn child from the Dynastic to Ptolemaic Period, provides us with an important context and background to now investigate these same ideas in the Greco-Roman era.

4.2 The medical and philosophical debates: is the unborn a human being? When does the ensoulment happen?

There are many sources that deal with the status of the unborn and the newborn in the Greco-Roman world. Between the 5th century BC and the Late Roman Period, there were numerous ethical, medical and philosophical debates which influenced medical practice and shaped legal systems on the subject.³⁰

The main questions surrounding this ancient debate centred on the nature of the unborn child: was it a creature which developed gradually? Was it a complete human being since it was conceived or was it an inanimate part of the mother's body, which could not have any independent life until the moment of birth? These philosophical views were all represented in the Greco-Roman world, and must have co-existed and been accepted in Egypt, even if some were more popular than others.

4.2.1 *The gradualist view*

The Hippocratic writers, who wrote their earliest medical treatises in the 5th century BC, but were influenced by centuries of medical practice, held a view that can be defined as gradualist. According to this, the foetus was a shapeless creature, which gradually became human when the limbs became visible after 40–55 days, when movement started after 100 days, and was only fully human when the child was ready to be born.³¹ The Hippocratics themselves did not examine the question of when the soul entered the body, thus making the child a complete rational human being.³²

Aristotle (384–322 BC) solved this problem of the soul by explaining that with the gradual physical development of the body there corresponded a gradual development of the soul.³³ The child's soul already potentially existed in the father's and the mother's seed, but the female seed, the menstrual blood, is activated only by its encounter with the male seed, which contains the active part of the soul. The male seed, nourished and concocted in the female womb, becomes an embryo with a vegetative soul, similar to one of a plant. Gradually, the embryo develops a sensitive soul, similar to the one of an animal, and becomes a foetus. Finally, the foetus develops a rational soul by the end of gestation, but it can only refine its human soul after it is born, thanks to life experience and contact with adults.

What is common between the Hippocratic treatises and Aristotle's ideas, is the apparently very low status given to mothers. Indeed, their wombs were believed to be a sort of independent living entity which could not be controlled. Plato claimed that the womb could suddenly decide to wander freely in the body, and if it was not fecundated for a long time, it could make the woman seriously ill.³⁴ The Hippocratics and Aristotle did not refute this theory of the 'wandering womb', and some of their writings suggest they followed it.³⁵ The timely opening of the mouth of the womb was generally considered fundamental for conception, because it allowed the male seed to enter the womb and to be retained. Therefore, women were considered to be passive receptacles of the male seed,³⁶ and subdued to the changing will of their own womb. In addition, according to the Hippocratics, the mother had no active role in the labour either;³⁷ in fact, it was the foetus itself that decided when it was ready to be born. However, despite its spontaneous decision to be born, the foetus was not considered to be a fully rational human being, but more like a chick which broke its eggshell because it was suffering from a lack of space and nourishment.³⁸ As shown above, this metaphor of the chick in the eggshell stretches back to the Dynastic Period.

Galen (AD 130–200) supported the idea of a gradual development of the child, and followed the Platonic model of the tripartite division of the soul. The liver, Galen reports, is the first organ that is formed, which produces the blood; at this stage, the embryo has a vegetative soul. The second organ is the heart, that gives the foetus an animal-like sensitive soul. Finally, with the formation of the brain, the foetus acquires a rational soul.³⁹ Despite the precise terminology used to define the physical development of the organs, there are some contradictions in Galen's discussion of the soul which deserve a closer look. That is, in his *Formation of the Foetus*, Galen seems to argue against the tripartite soul, saying that the formation of the foetus might be regulated by a leading soul which manages all the parts of the body.⁴⁰ Also, in his *On Semen*, Galen claims that the child might only acquire full rational sense after birth.⁴¹

The idea of a delayed and gradual ensoulment was adopted by Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430),⁴² who was largely inspired by the Aristotelian model of the gradual and tripartite development of a vegetative, sensitive and rational soul. The ideas of Aristotle, and their interpretation by Augustine, influenced the Western Church tradition.⁴³

4.2.2 *Plato and the Pythagoreans*

According to Plato and the Pythagoreans, the soul already existed at the moment of conception, so, theoretically, a human zygote (fertilised egg) could already be considered a human being. Plato believed in the pre-existence of the human soul before the conception of the embryo.⁴⁴ The body and the soul were not created together; the soul lived a free life until it was trapped in the human body. The idea of ensoulment from conception inspired Christian writers, such as Tertullian,⁴⁵ and this concept became particularly popular within the Eastern Christian Church.⁴⁶ Although views among Eastern Christian writers varied: for

instance, Origen (AD 184–253) took the idea of the pre-existence of the soul from Plato,⁴⁷ while Gregory of Nyssa (335–384), although following Origen's theory of ensoulment from conception,⁴⁸ denied the pre-existence of the soul,⁴⁹ claiming that the soul was created together with the body.

4.2.3 The Stoics

According to the Stoics the unborn child is not a human being until it is born.⁵⁰ These ideas were transmitted by later authors such as Cicero, Porphyry⁵¹ and Pseudo-Plutarch.⁵² Pseudo-Plutarch in his *De Placitis* summarises the different positions of the Stoics, as opposed to Plato's position:

Plato says, that the embryo is an animal; for, being contained in the mother's womb, motion and aliment are imparted to it. The Stoics say that it is not an animal, but to be accounted part of the mother's belly; like as we see the fruit of trees is esteemed part of the trees, until it be full ripe; then it falls and ceaseth to belong to the tree; thus it is with the embryo. Empedocles, [says] that the embryo is not an animal, yet whilst it remains in the belly it breathes. The first breath that it draws as an animal is when the infant is newly born; then the child having its moisture separated, the extraneous air making an entrance into the empty places, a respiration is caused in the infant by the empty vessels receiving of it. Diogenes, [says] that infants are nurtured in the matrix inanimate, yet they have a natural heat; but presently, when the infant is cast into the open air, its heat brings air into the lungs, and so it becomes an animal. Herophilus acknowledgeth that a natural, but not an animal motion, and that the nerves are the cause of that motion; that then they become animals, when being first born they suck in something of the air.⁵³

The thoughts of the Stoics, as presented by these later sources, all agree on seeing the child as a non-animal with no independent existence from the mother; the foetus could have some physiological functions (breath from the mother, heat, involuntary motion), but it was not self-aware and could not decide when it would be born. According to the author of the *Ad Gaurum*, labour was not initiated by the foetus but rather by the mother's uterus which contracted, expelling the child.⁵⁴ The child became human only when it was born, because the soul entered into the baby's mouth at that time.⁵⁵

4.2.4 Abortion and embryotomy

All these three views about the nature of the unborn child had different implications for medical practice and the legal system, because they influenced people's attitude towards matters such as abortion and embryotomy of the foetus. In the Hippocratic treatises and later medical writers, both abortion and embryotomy are described as commonly accepted practices.⁵⁶ Aristotle specifies that abortion is not a condemnable practice as long as it happens in the first gestational phase.⁵⁷

Imperial Roman law set the first legal limits on these practices between the end of the 2nd century and the second half of the 4th century AD. Septimius Severus and Caracalla (AD 198–211) promoted a law which condemned a woman who provoked an abortion to a temporary exile.⁵⁸ Not long after this, the selling of abortifacients was prohibited, with the death sentence the punishment for the seller if the mother died.⁵⁹ Later, in AD 374, Valentinian I banned the exposure of children:

Each person has to rear his offspring. And if he thought it ought to be exposed, he will be liable to the punishment which has been decided.⁶⁰

Initially, these Roman laws were aimed to protect the interests of the *pater familias* by defending the life of his unborn heirs. From the early 4th century, it is likely that laws were influenced by Christian ideas. Despite an ongoing debate among scholars,⁶¹ it seems that almost all ancient Christian writers openly condemned abortion, considering it a sin. For instance, the author of the *Didaché* writes:

You will not murder offspring by means of abortion.⁶²

However, as mentioned above, the differing views among Christian writers about the nature of the soul of the unborn, meant some variability in opinions as to the timings of abortions. Those that followed the Platonic and Pythagorean tradition, where the human being had a soul from conception, had different views on abortion from those that followed the Aristotelian tradition, where the soul developed gradually (it being formed forty days after conception for males and ninety days after for females). Christian writers like Tertullian or Gregory of Nyssa,⁶³ who believed in the ensoulment at conception, condemned abortion at any gestational stage. However, Augustine of Hippo and St Thomas Aquinas, who believed in the gradual development of the soul, equally condemned abortion but they admitted that it was a less serious sin if it was practised at a very early gestational stage, when the embryo was not yet *formatus et animatus*.⁶⁴

Surprisingly, Tertullian, one of the most intransigent condemners of abortion, does not entirely condemn the practice of embryotomy;⁶⁵ indeed, he claims that destroying the foetus is acceptable if it is the only way to save the mother's life during a difficult labour. Yet, Tertullian calls the medical instrument for embryotomy 'the foetus slayer',⁶⁶ showing that his acceptance of this practice was reluctant.

Despite some Christian resistance, embryotomies were carried out well into the Byzantine Period, even though it was used exclusively as an exceptional solution to a difficult labour. Excessively delaying an embryotomy had fatal consequences, as shown in the accounts of the life of the empress Eudoxia, wife of the emperor Arcadius.⁶⁷ The empress could not give birth to her dead foetus naturally, and the child rotted in her womb, causing a long and painful death from septicaemia in 404 AD.

4.3 The unborn and the newborn among ordinary people: the uses of magic

The philosophical and medical debate presented above concerned only a small part of society that had access to education and were literate. The rest of the population needed to find alternative reasoning: the vast majority of people only had limited access to the arguments within the medical-philosophical debate, either through local doctors or through the oral tradition of street philosophers.⁶⁸ However, all social classes shared the same concerns about children's health and even educated people used magic alongside medical remedies.

As shown in Chapters 2 and 3, magical spells, gems and figurines were very popular and were used by all social classes. The womb of a pregnant woman was kept healthy not just by a good lifestyle but also with spells and charms,⁶⁹ that were believed to influence the will of the foetus itself. Among these charms described above, the group of magical gems called *ouroboroi* were used to protect the foetus in the womb; another group of gems called *okytokia* were believed to accelerate the labour by summoning the foetus to come out of the womb. For instance, in jasper gem CBd-1051 the foetus was asked to come out 'On its feet'; this probably means that it was considered able to understand such an order and make a decision to benefit its own welfare.⁷⁰

At the same time, stillborn fetuses were used in sorcery and for curses, whose efficacy was believed to be based on the polluting effect of bodily materials. The most polluting elements were bodily fluids, like menstrual blood, body waste and unburied corpses.⁷¹

An example of 'black' magic involving a foetus comes from a 3rd century AD petition to a *strategos*.⁷² A farmer called Gemellus alias Horion complains about a foetus (*brephos*) thrown onto his field to curse him and those who work with him. In one part Gemellus complains:

... he invaded with his wife and a certain Zenas, bringing with them a *brephos*.⁷³ They wanted to encircle my cultivator with their envy so that he would abandon his own cultivating after a partial harvesting of my crops from another plot of mine, and they themselves gathered it up ... They threw the same *brephos* at me wanting to encircle me too with their envy ...⁷⁴

Nevertheless, the repulsive power of polluting elements could also be used in a protective way, if directed against evil forces; menstrual blood was smeared on the doors of houses to protect them, for example.⁷⁵ Equally, a bundle with a foetus was found in the roof rubble of 4th century house in Kellis;⁷⁶ this kind of deposition might not only be a way for families to keep the child within the household, but also to powerfully protect the house.⁷⁷

Magical rituals also existed that involved living children. Infants were commonly seen in the Greco-Roman world as inexperienced human beings and thus useful in such matters. Seneca, following the Aristotelian view of the gradual development of the soul, claimed that children developed their rational soul only

with experience and through the teaching of adults.⁷⁸ However, such inexperience was a positive attribute in magic; a child's uncorrupted soul was purer than that of an adult's, and therefore closer to the realm of the divine. As such, it was common in Roman Egypt to use children as a *medium* to communicate with deities.⁷⁹ Greek magical papyri⁸⁰ preserve several incantations mentioning the use of children.⁸¹

4.4 Social recognition of children observed through burial practices

Magical-medical practice is not the only evidence available for understanding the social status of unborn and newborn children among the general population in antiquity. Some scholars contend that the way fetuses and newborn children were buried could actually tell us about the status of children within their family and wider society.⁸² As such, the study of burials of fetuses and newborns is receiving an increasing amount of attention.⁸³

Burials of fetuses and newborn babies have been studied both in their archaeological context and in their relationship with burials of older children and adults. Their association with other age groups can reveal a great deal about the way fetuses and newborns were perceived; for instance, if they were buried some distance from adults, forming a separate group with other children, or if, they were buried together with adults in family tombs. It is also important to note whether newborns were mummified or treated in the same way as adults, and whether the funerary equipment was as expensive as those of older children and adults. In other words, were fetuses and babies in Greco-Roman Egypt buried differently from older children and adults, and if so, did this happen occasionally or systematically? If we can establish that most infants up to a certain age regularly received a different kind of burial from everyone else, we can show that there is a clear link between the type of burial and the social recognition of infant children.

This topic will probably receive more definitive answers in the next few years, thanks to the joint work of many archaeologists taking part in an international project called 'L'Enfant et la mort dans l'Antiquité' (EMA), which studies 'the social status of the child in antiquity as seen through the funerary evidence'.⁸⁴ The data coming from more than 4,000 burials have been included in an online database that combines textual data and scanned images.⁸⁵ The project includes Egyptian burials dating from the Ptolemaic Period to Late Antiquity, with the case studies on Egyptian tombs being published in 2012.⁸⁶

From the Dynastic to the Late Period, this is evidence of atypical burials for children and fetuses, in particular intramural⁸⁷ and pot and coffin burials in urban settlements,⁸⁸ as well an example found in the foundations of a fortress.⁸⁹ Yet there are also children that have been carefully mummified by their family, and were thus probably destined for a regular or family burial,⁹⁰ where fetuses and newborn children were buried together with their parents.

In the Dynastic Period, children were mainly buried either directly in the ground, or in pots, baskets of different manufacture, or rectangular wooden coffins.⁹¹ Burial directly in the ground was probably the fate for poorer children who could not afford a coffin, although this may have been stolen or separated from

the body in modern times. Nevertheless, in Egyptian religion, the coffin was not necessary to preserve the body, what really counted was the mummification.⁹² In a group of basket burials found in Deir el-Medina, the funerary set did not include anything valuable, just food (bread, raisins, dates, grain, etc.) and oval jars. However, a very intriguing find comes from a group of high-quality basket burials with lids, found in the Deir el-Medina east cemetery: beside the usual food offerings, the child was also deposited with some loaves of bread in the shape of a feminine body (Figure 3.9). These loaves look very similar to Dynastic fertility figurines,⁹³ in particular the rough ostraca and pebble figurines produced in Deir el-Medina (Figure 3.8). The place and the period are the same, so these round, leg-less figurines were clearly used within the context of both domestic and funerary cults. Such female bread figurines also imply production for ritual consumption, as was the case elsewhere with similar figurines used in other fertility rituals.⁹⁴

The most refined coffins for babies attested in the NK are those for the two female fetuses found in the tomb of Tutankhamon.⁹⁵ The fetuses are five and eight–nine months old, and were probably miscarried by Tutankhamon's wife Ankhesenamon. Each one of the fetuses was carefully embalmed and buried in two anthropomorphic coffins, one inside the other. The older fetus also had a gilded cartonnage mask. An anthropomorphic coffin from Deir el-Medina XIX Dynasty depicts a girl as if she were alive. This representation may derive from the different conception of death brought by the Amarna religion.⁹⁶ This girl is also represented with the body proportions of an adult woman. From the NK and especially from the Late Period, there are various attestations of anthropomorphic coffins depicting young children of both sexes as adults. Some of these coffins come from the cachette of royal mummies at Deir el Bahari, dating from the XVIII until the XXI Dynasty.⁹⁷ In the Late Period there is also the production of Bes-shaped and Ptah-Sokar-Osiris-shaped coffins containing the mummies of fetuses or newborn children (Figure 4.2).⁹⁸

The lid of one coffin shaped like Ptah-Sokaris-Osiris has an inscription:⁹⁹

Offer that the king gives to Ptah-Sokar-Osiris, [Lord] of the Western Necropolis, great god, Lord of the sky, may he give the water to your ba, and offerings . . .

This inscription is an invocation to the god represented in the coffin. It shows that children were buried in these god-shaped coffins not to be deified but rather to be protected by the deity.

In the Late Period tombs in Saqqara,¹⁰⁰ newborn children and infants were treated exactly like adults, and any variation in their treatment did not occur according to their age but according to their social status.¹⁰¹

An intriguing case-study, dating to the Late Dynastic-Early Ptolemaic Period, comes from the settlement of Qasr Allam, in the oasis of Bahariya.¹⁰² Here a complex has been investigated, which was a religious area called the 'Precinct of Amon' in the TIP, that was later converted into a funerary zone. The tombs here also included animals, and the archaeologists working at the site noticed that

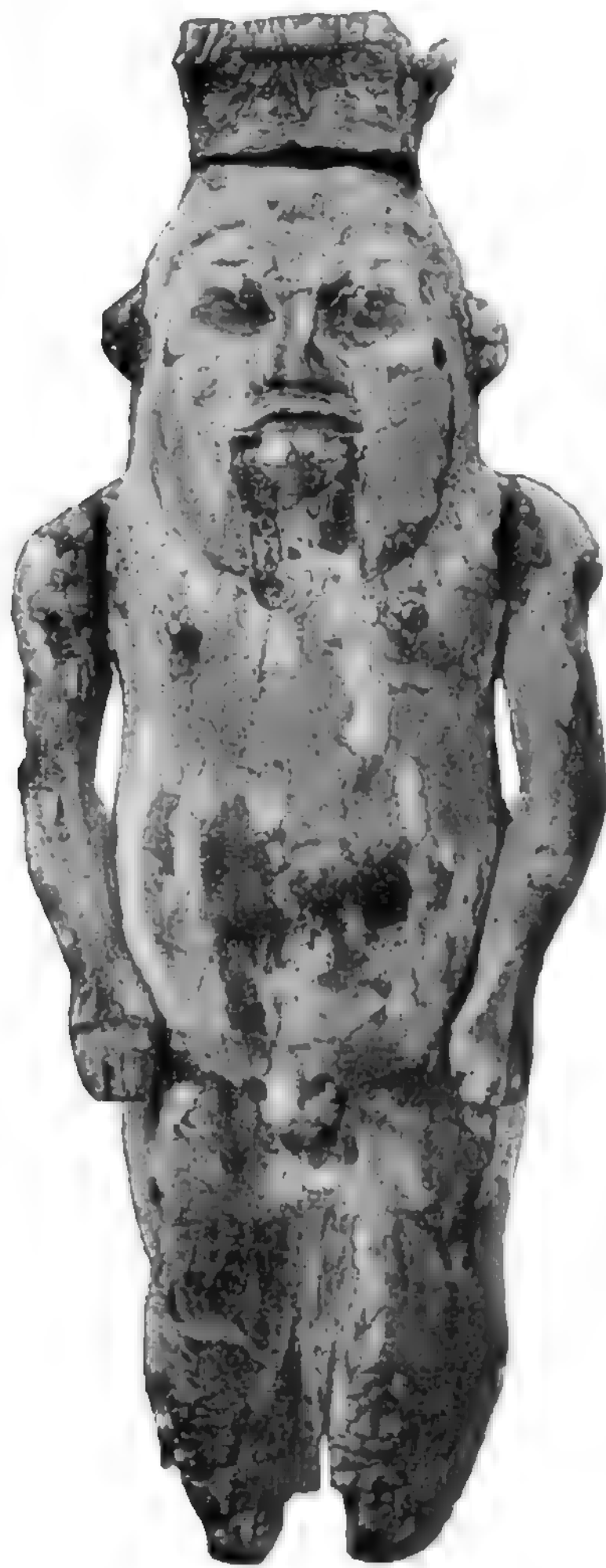


Figure 4.2 Wooden Bes-shaped coffin which contained a mummified foetus. Late Dynastic Period. From Egypt.

some burials of babies were associated with the bodies of non-mummified dogs, who died a natural death. They argued that the Egyptians might have taken from the Greeks the belief in the eschatological role of the dog.¹⁰³

In the Greco-Roman Period, children continued to be buried directly in the ground,¹⁰⁴ in vases, rectangular coffins¹⁰⁵ and in anthropomorphic coffins. As in the Late Period, Ptolemaic and Roman anthropoid coffins for babies were still made of cartonnage (sometimes painted and gilded) or painted pottery. The Dynastic tradition of representing very young children as adults also continues into the Roman Period;¹⁰⁶ a cartonnage coffin from Akhmim gave a dead newborn special honours by representing him as a Pharaoh/Osiris.¹⁰⁷

Besides the decoration of coffins, some Roman child mummies received very high-quality mummification, and their outstanding preservation raised the interest of scientists who CT-scanned and carbon-dated them, and good example being a Roman mummy of a baby, now preserved at the St. Louis School of Medicine (Washington University).¹⁰⁸ The provenance of the mummy is unknown, but a team there carried out various CT scans of the bones and internal organs, and carbon-dated the bandages. They were dated to the Roman Period, between the

1st century BC and 1st century AD, and the bones revealed that the child was only seven–eight months old. The internal organs were missing, and instead large dense objects were found inside the body, which were identified as amulets. The skin was black as a consequence of its treatment with resinous oils.

Another individual was tested by the Antikenmuseum of Basel, this time a Roman mummified girl that was loaned from a private collection.¹⁰⁹ The mummified body was CT-scanned and carbon-dated by three scientists of the ‘Center of Forensic Imaging and Virtopsy, Institute of Forensic Medicine, University of Bern’.¹¹⁰ The mummy was of an eight-month-old girl, and was radiocarbon dated to between AD 18 and 134. Her skin was dark like the St Louis mummy but is perfectly preserved. It is still possible to see that the mummy was originally covered with gold dust. This in my opinion could also be dust coming from a potential gilded cartonnage coffin, which is now lost. The girl’s hair is also preserved, and was coloured with red henna following an Egyptian tradition which goes back to the Dynastic Period. The presence of sodium chloride, found in all the cavities of the body, protected the mummy from rehydration. Alongside the examples of anthropoid coffins, this mummy girl shows that some newborn females in Roman Egypt received high-quality mummification.

During the excavation of the Greco-Roman necropolis in the area of Gabbari, west of Alexandria,¹¹¹ found during the construction of a bridge, more than 300 children between birth and 15 years old were found in tombs dating from the Hellenistic to the Late Roman Period. The children were often buried with adults, showing that they were considered to be part of their family. The number of newborn babies less than 1 year old are very small (81) compared to the number of children between the ages of 1 and 15 years (251). The number of newborn babies seems to increase in the Late Roman Period, even if this is probably due to the fact that the necropolis has a lower number of bodies dated to the Hellenistic Period. The number of newborn children is not evenly distributed in the necropolis: while older children appear in almost every area, newborns tend to occupy certain areas, especially in the Late Roman Period.¹¹² There was a particular concentration of very young children among the Hellenistic burials in area 6 of the necropolis: the children aged between fifteen months and 3 years were buried separately from the others, although the older children were buried closer to the adults.¹¹³ The older children were buried in coffins and pits, while the newborn children were buried in amphorae and *enchrytrismoi*.¹¹⁴

A more interpretative study took place at the tombs of the Necropolis of the Kharga Oasis, in use between the 4th century BC and 5th century AD.¹¹⁵ Here the children were normally mummified and buried in the same way as the adults. However, newborns under 1 year were not buried with the same care, and were never mummified. The archaeologists here argued that the body of a newborn was perhaps too fragile for mummification. However, they also admitted that this different treatment probably meant that newborn children had a different status before their first year, and were granted a better burial only once they started to speak and walk.¹¹⁶ This cemetery contrasts starkly with the Christian cemetery in Kellis (AD 50–450).¹¹⁷ Here, infants less than twelve months were treated exactly

the same as adults, with one even wrapped in expensive raw cotton. It is claimed from this that in the 2nd–3rd century AD, the earliest Christian communities had hope for salvation for everyone, including babies.¹¹⁸

Finally, it is important here to mention fake mummies, a phenomenon which included infant examples from the Dynastic to the Roman period. Fake mummies were made in antiquity to replace a body that was either not preserved, or were created for a ritual purpose;¹¹⁹ they were also sometimes made in modern times by forgers. Modern false mummies were made with various kind of materials including bandages and animal bones. Modern CT scans are identifying fake mummies in museums, but others still await a precise identification. As such we need to be careful when we assess infant burials that have not yet undergone such tests.¹²⁰

4.5 Social recognition of unborn and newborn children: the legal documents

The legal systems in Greco-Roman Egypt give us the last important piece of evidence to complete this overview of the social status of unborn and newborn children. In order to reflect upon the status of the unborn and newborn in Egyptian, Greek and Roman law, I will examine several Greco-Roman Egyptian documents that talk about children.¹²¹ Parallel to this are the Jewish communities in Egypt, who, since the early Ptolemaic Period, partly maintained their own social organisation and legal system, but this will not be the focus here. All these different legal systems mirrored the different ways that they conceived the social status of the members of their respective groups.

Here, I will focus mainly on documents written in Greek dating between the 2nd century BC and 2nd century AD. Due to the limits of the present book, I will not analyse the Jewish legal documents and the Late Roman Coptic documents, which would be nevertheless extremely instructive.

To add briefly to my earlier summary of Egyptian marriage contracts, laid out in Chapter 1, it is clear that sometimes potential future children are mentioned in them, and indicated as future heirs of their father's and mother's property. Importantly, to the best of my knowledge, there are no attestations in any early Ptolemaic Demotic documents of a lack of recognition of children by their father.

Compared to these Demotic contracts, Greek contracts from Egypt reflect a very different situation for women and children: women could not act without a guardian and a child's social position depended on its recognition by their father. In Roman law, the condition of women and children was similar to that in Greek law, with some differences for the rights of children conceived during the marriage.

The social recognition of children by their father was declared in birth registrations, which normally included the legal registration of the birth and the child's name. Roman law in Egypt was strict about this procedure, because the child had to be recognised and given the father's name as soon as he was born. Greco-Egyptian law, on the contrary, did not require any formal contract for the registration of children, so only occasionally did parents choose to register their child, and even then it could be some time after its birth.¹²²

Another aspect of social recognition was the celebration of the baby by his family. One important feast attested from the Roman Period was called ‘the feast of the fortieth day’ in a papyrus from the Fayyum¹²³ and by Censorinus.¹²⁴ The end of this forty days became very meaningful in the Christian tradition;¹²⁵ after this period the child could receive baptism, and the mother was declared to be out of her confinement and pure. However, this number forty recurs in many other cultures, because it also took forty days for the mother to recover from the delicate and risky phase called the *postpartum* period, a phase characterised by small uterine discharges of blood. Even today in Egypt it is said: ‘before the forty days the grave of the mother is still open’.¹²⁶



Figure 4.3 Gold glass medallion with a mother and child. From Egypt (possibly Alexandria). Early 4th century AD. Glass, gold leaf.

To underline the importance of the social and familial recognition of children in Greco-Egyptian and Roman law, I have chosen a group of documents which show what could happen to unborn and newborn children if the father died or divorced from the mother. In both Greco-Egyptian and Roman law, the death of the husband or a divorce could end a marriage. The consequence of this was that the husband, or the family of the husband, had to give the dowry back to the ex-wife or the widow. In addition, the mother and the family of the husband had to decide what to do with the children conceived or born during the marriage.

4.5.1 *The legal recognition of unborn children*

In a Greek contract,¹²⁷ Dionysarion, a recently widowed pregnant woman, made an agreement with the family of her late husband for the restitution of her dowry. In exchange, Dionysarion declared she would cover the expenses of childbirth herself without any further request or quarrel. The husband's family also gave her the right to expose her child and remarry:¹²⁸

ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ ἔνκυος καθέστηκεν ἡ Διονυσάριον, μὴ ἐπελεύσεσθαι αὐτὴν μηδὲ περὶ λ[οχ]είων διὰ τοῦ ὑπὲρ τούτων εὐπειθῆ γεγονέναι καὶ ἐξεῖναι αὐτῇ μῆς... ἑατῆς τὸ βρέφος ἐκτίθεσθαι καὶ συναρμόζεσθαι ἄλλῳ] ἀνδρί.

Since Dionysarion is also pregnant, she shall not bring action about the expenses of the child's birth because of being compliant about these matters; and she is allowed to expose her infant and to be joined to another man in marriage.¹²⁹

In this document, the family of Dionysarion's husband seems to have some rights on the child, but they lose interest in the child's destiny once they find an economic agreement with its mother. We do not know what Dionysarion decided concerning her child, but she must have at least considered the economic and social advantages of exposing it. If she had been a Roman citizen the outcome of this contract would have been very different.¹³⁰ In this agreement, according to Greek law, the mother-in-law inherited the estate of her deceased son, while according to Roman law the heir would have been Dionysarion's unborn son.

An example of such differences between Greek and Roman law can be observed in a group of documents¹³¹ concerning a Roman citizen, Petronilla, who had conceived a child during a *iustum connubium* with her husband, but the husband died before his son was born. The mother, according to Roman law,¹³² had the right to give her son the husband's name and to obtain for him the inheritance of his father. However, she had to demonstrate to her husband's family, and to some witnesses, that the child she was carrying was the one conceived with her husband. Petronilla followed a Roman practice called *inspectio ventris*, the inspection of her womb.¹³³ Petronilla's body had to be periodically inspected by several skilled midwives for the entire length of her pregnancy. From the documents, we also learn that Petronilla gave birth in front of witnesses. Despite all the apparent precautions taken by Petronilla to safeguard her pregnancy,

this controversy did not end because the family of her late husband suspected the baby of being illegitimate. Petronilla fought for the recognition of her child because this gave her an economic and social benefit without any disadvantages. In fact, unlike the Greek woman Dionysarion, who had to expose her child if she wanted to remarry, the Roman Petronilla was free to remarry despite having a child from a previous marriage. Petronilla's case is not exceptional in Roman law: after a pregnancy from a dead husband, Roman women had to wait about ten months after the husband's death before they could remarry, in order to avoid any suspicion concerning the paternity of the unborn child (*turbatio sanguinis*).¹³⁴

Another document concerning the rights of the unborn, is a marriage contract between two Roman citizens:

[ἐὰ]ν [δὲ] καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς ἀπαλλαγῆς ἐγκυος ἦν ἡ γαμουμένη, δότω αὐτῇ ὁ γαμῶν εἰς λόγον δαπάνης λοχείας δραχμὰς τεσσαράκοντα. ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς ἀπαιτήσεως τῆς πρ[ο]κειμένης φερνῆς ἡ πρᾶξις ἔσται τοῖς περὶ τὴν γαμουμένην παρά τε τοῦ γαμοῦντος καὶ ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αὐτῷ πάντων.¹³⁵

And if at the time of separation the bride should be pregnant, the groom shall give to her 40 drachmas for the expenses of childbirth. Concerning the request for return of the afore-mentioned dowry, those on the bride's side will have the right of execution on the groom and all his possessions.¹³⁶

Finding a marriage contract between two Roman citizens becomes easy after the Edict of Caracalla in AD 212, when all Egyptians were given Roman citizenship. However, despite their Roman names, this contract still preserves some Greco-Egyptian practices: for example, the bride was not given away by her father but by her mother. This could have happened because the father was dead, but in Roman law any other male member of the family would have been more likely appointed as *tutor* of the bride than the bride's mother. The only male involved in this case was a Synestos, who helped the bride's mother sign the documents because she was illiterate.¹³⁷

More importantly, this marriage contract followed Greek rather than Roman law in its agreement concerning any future child conceived during the marriage. According to Roman law, children born during marriage belonged exclusively to the father after a divorce, yet this contract does not mention any future recognition of children. It only states that if divorce happens when the wife is pregnant, the father would give her the dowry back and would pay for the childbirth expenses.

4.5.2 The legal recognition of newborn children

I will conclude by mentioning two Greco-Egyptian legal documents concerning the rights of children who were already born, but where the father had either died or divorced the mother before their birth.

In a Greco-Egyptian petition from the Fayyum, a mother fought to get her husband's inheritance for her orphaned son; his father was a cavalryman:

παρ' Ἡρακλείδου Ἀρίστωνος Θραικός, τῆς αὐτῆς ἵππαρχίας, ὀρφανοῦ, μετὰ προστάτιδος τῆς οὔσης αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ συγγραφῆς συνοικισίου τῆς αὐτοῦ μητρὸς Θαίδος τῆς Ἀπολλωνίου.¹³⁸

From Herakleides son of Ariston, Thracian, of the same hipparchy, an orphan, with his guardian on the basis of a marriage contract being his mother Thais daughter of Apollonios.¹³⁹

The quarrel concerned the division of a lot of land with another cavalryman. The child appeared as the recognised legitimate heir of his father and, in this particular petition, the mother assumed the unusual role of guardian of her child. The mother had no rights on her husband's inheritance, only her son had access to it, but she could legally represent her child.¹⁴⁰

Another, later, case from Greek law is a petition written by a woman to recover the dowry from her husband's father.¹⁴¹ The woman had been abandoned by her husband soon after she had given birth to a daughter. The husband had married another woman in Alexandria, and the abandoned wife was struggling to survive without support and her dowry. Her petition was not aimed directly at her husband but rather at her father-in-law, who was asked by her ex-husband to sell one of his properties in order to collect the necessary money for giving back the dowry. The woman also claimed that her husband abandoned her because he was 'ill-disposed' towards her and the child.¹⁴² It is clear that the father did not 'recognise' the child, perhaps because it was female or maybe just because he wanted to marry another woman.

4.6 Preliminary conclusions

It is impossible to provide a singular coherent picture of the status of the unborn and newborn child in Greco-Roman Egypt. The philosophical and religious debates, which influenced the intellectual and medical thought of the inhabitants of Greco-Roman Egypt from the Hellenistic to the Late Roman Period, show that there were many different views concerning the nature of the unborn. Magical practices mirror a popular culture that was probably only vaguely influenced by philosophical and medical debate. Even so, in both the medical-philosophical debate and in magical practice, we find the same idea of an existential and spiritual liminality for unborn and newborn children.

This liminality was certainly felt at the social and legal level; this can clearly be seen in the rather crude forms of social recognition that existed, such as the exposure of children in Greco-Egyptian law and the inspection of women's wombs in Roman law. These practices seem not to belong to the traditional Egyptian legal system, but show how much, in the society of Greco-Roman Egypt, the status of the child depended on the social position of its father and on his willingness, or on his ability, to recognise the child as his legitimate heir. Father's legal supremacy also shows that mothers were not allowed to take any decision regarding their children unless the husband had divorced, left or died.

In contrast to this, most of the funerary practices for unborn and infant children are examples of private affection; even if the child was not part of society, it was surely part of the family, and as such it was buried, and in some cases carefully mummified.

Therefore, if we compare the evidence from burials with that from legal contracts, there is an apparent contradiction between the frequent high level of family care given to children's burials and the lack of social and legal recognition for newborn children. However, when we look at burials alongside ideas of social acceptance, it is essential to consider whether any apparent lack of recognition was due to the child's early age or simply to an unwanted pregnancy. A stillborn child who died before reaching the age of official social recognition could still be carefully buried by its family, while the body of an unwanted child could either be carelessly discarded or used for medical and magical purposes.

It would also be highly instructive to include in any future study more examples of burials and more legal sources from the Late Roman Period. This was a time when the legal status of children may well have been influenced by a wider application of Roman laws in Egypt as well as by different conceptions of life and family brought by Christianity.

Notes

- 1 Here the term is used as in common English parlance. As such, I do not want to approach liminality as defined by anthropologists because, in simple terms, the term is used in that field as a central rite of passage phase, where subjects go through full and complex periods of social or physical transition and transformation. Unlike children and adults, unborn and newborn children are not transitioning from a previous stage; they are 'emerging' as fetuses and children from the liminality of non-existence, and facing their first separation at birth (or at the end of confinement). Therefore, instead of separation, liminality and incorporation, we should talk about liminality, separation and incorporation. For the anthropological definitions of liminality see Van Gennep 2013; Turner 1971.
- 2 Politicians, legislators and members of religious associations look for inspiration and authority from the arguments of the philosophers and medical practitioners who operated in the Greco-Roman world: Schroedel 2000. Cf. <http://www.priestsforlife.org/magisterium/earlychurchfathers/tertullian.html>, last accessed 3 July 2018.
- 3 Nyord 2009: 420–421.
- 4 Nyord 2009: *ibid.*
- 5 London, BM 10822 Vo (Egypt, AD 47). Tr. Simpson et al. 2003: 472.
- 6 P. *Jumilac* (Louvre E.17.110, 140 BC). Sauneron 1960: 19–27; Vandier 1961: XII, 24; Yoyotte 1962: 139–146. Spieser 2007: 23–25. The semen reached the testicles through two channels (mtw) described in P. *Ebers* 854 and Nunn 2002: 48–49.
- 7 Transliteration by UCL: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/amarna/belief.html>. Last accessed 3 July 2018.
- 8 Tr. by Lichtheim 1976: 96–100.
- 9 *Wb* 3, 76.1–3.
- 10 Feucht 2004: 37. Manniche 2006: 97. Goudsouzian 2012: 34–35.
- 11 Pinch 2002: 63, 140, 153–154.
- 12 Papyrus Berlin 3027, chap. F (5, 8–6, 8). Erman 1901: 26. Yamazaki 2003: 24. My translation comes from the French version in Marshall 2015: 75–76.

- 13 Manniche 2006: 97. Goudsouzian 2012: 34–35. Spieser 2007: 27.
- 14 *Wb* 3, 217.3–8; 237.
- 15 *Wb* 3, 396–398.8.
- 16 ‘Child in the mother’s womb’ in *Wb* 1, 315.10–12. See also *wnn.w* which indicates both the child in the womb and the solar child. The gestation of the solar child is described and represented in a crypt of the temple of Hathor in Dendera. Spieser 2007: 35ff.
- 17 For a more discussion about the meaning of the egg in medical and religious texts see Spieser 2007.
- 18 Papyrus Berlin 3024. Lichtheim 1973: 163ff.
- 19 Lichtheim 1973: 165.
- 20 *CT* II, 217c–218a. = A. de Buck, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts*, I–VII, Chicago. 1935–1961. Tr. by Faulkner 1973: 125–126, Spell 148, lines 217–218.
- 21 Nyord 2009: 475 and fig. 14.
- 22 *PT* 669; *CT* 682 and 989; Nyord 2009: 468–469.
- 23 *PT* 669, 1965b.
- 24 Ostrakon CG 25074. Manniche 2006: 102 pl. 3. Also see the embryonal and foetal development of Re, represented in the crypt of Dendera, in the drawing by Spieser 2007: 36 and the image of the solar child *in utero* painted in P. Papyrus Brooklyn 47.218.156. Late Dynastic Period. Photo available at: <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/60794>. Last accessed 3 July 2018.
- 25 Spieser 2007: 27–28, fig. 1.
- 26 See previous endnotes in this section for references to transliteration and translation of this text.
- 27 Assmann 1999: 145A, 16.
- 28 My translation comes from the German version in Feucht 2004: 43.
- 29 Papyrus Berlin 3027, chap. F (5, 8–6, 8). Erman 1901: 26. Yamazaki 2003: 24. My translation comes from the French version in Marshall 2015: 62–63.
- 30 For the discussion of philosophical and medical sources see the papers in Brisson 2008 (in particular the ones by Hanson and Gourinat). See also Dunstan 1984, Jones 2005 and Dasen 2013.
- 31 Hp. *Nutr.* 52; *ibid.*, *Nat. Puer.* 21.7.510–512. Ed. Littré. Cf. Censorinus, *De Die Natali*, XI.7.
- 32 Dasen 2013: 19.
- 33 Arist. *GA* 731a.25, 734b.4ff.; *ibid.*, *De An.* 402a.6ff.; *ibid.*, *HA* 3–583b.
- 34 Pl. *Ti.* 91c. Aubert 1989: 423, note 2.
- 35 Hp. *Nat. Mul.* 3.4, 14; Arist. *HA* 582b22–26. Aubert 1989: 423 and note 3.
- 36 Arist., *GA* 729a.30.
- 37 38 Hp. *Nat. Puer.* 30.7–10, 7.536–538. Ed. Littré.
- 39 Gal. *Foet. Form.* 3: IV 667–670, = 74, 8–13 Nickel 2001. Cf. Debru 2008: 279–280.
- 40 Gal. *Foet. Form.* 6: IV 696. 6. = 100, 20–24 Nickel 2001.
- 41 Gal. *De Sem.* 4.542–543. Ed. Kühn.
- 42 August., *Quaestionum in Hept.* I, II; n.80. Dunstan 1984: 40.
- 43 Dunstan 1984; Jones 2005. St Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) continued this tradition after Augustine and Aristotle, again arguing for a delayed ensoulment of the human being, and a gradual development of the soul. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae; 64. 1. 1a; 76.1; 1a; 76.3.
- 44 Pl. *Phd.* 105c–d.
- 45 Tertull. *Ap.* 9.
- 46 See Dunstan 1984; Jones 2005.
- 47 Mateos Seco L. F. et al. 2009: 554.
- 48 Origen, *De Principiis*, 2.8.3, 2.9.2–8.
- 49 Greg. Nyss. *De Hominis Opificio*, 28.3–4 (PG 44.232B). Discussed in Mateos Seco L. F. et al. 2009: 34.

- 50 In particular, Empedocles and Herophilus. Their thoughts on human respiration are reported by Cic. *ND* 2.136. The idea that the air entered the lungs of the newborn when he was born is attributed by Ps.-Plutarch to Diogenes. Ps.-Plut. *De Placit.*, 5. 19, 907 D.
- 51 Porphyry is recognised by Kalbfleisch (1895) as the supposed author of *Ad Gaurum*. See Hanson 2008: 98, note 9.
- 52 The Stoics who seem to have considered the embryo as an inanimate creature were Diogenes, Empedocles and Herophilus. Porph. *Gaur.* and Ps.-Plut., *De Placit.* All these sources are discussed in Gourinat 2008: 59–77.
- 53 Ps.-Plut. *De Placit.* 5, 15 (whether the infant in the mother's womb be an animal). English transl. by Goodwin 1909 in <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/plutarch/nature/index.html>. Last accessed 3 July 2018.
- 54 Porph. *Gaur.* 7.1–3, 43–44, Kalbfleisch 1895.
- 55 Plut. *De Primo* 2. 946 C; *ibid.*, *De Stoic.* 41, 1052 F; *ibid.*, *De Comm.*, 1084 D–E; Porph. *Gaur.* 14,4, p. 54, 15–20 Kalbfleisch 1895. Discussed in Gourinat 2008: 71–77 and notes 59–70.
- 56 Abortion: Hp. *Nat. puer.* 13, 7.488–492 Littré; *ibid.*, *Carn.* 19, 8.608–612 Littré. Soranus prefers contraception to the destruction of the foetus: Sor. 1.60; Embryotomy (ἐμβρυοτομία): Hp. *Foet.Exsect.* 8.512–513 Littré; *ibid.*, *Morb.Mul.* 1.70; Sor. 4.9–13; Cels. 7.29. For a list of sources on embryotomy see Lang 2012: 196, note 230 and LSJ, 541.
- 57 Arist., *Pol.*, 1335b24.
- 58 Measure reported by Marcian (*Dig.* 47, 11, 4) and discussed in Frier and McGinn 2004: 195 (Case 91). See *ibid.*, for a discussion of Roman laws from the Digest which protected the unborn child (Case 48), its rights if the parents divorced or the father died (Case 47).
- 59 *Dig.* 48.1.38.5, Paulus, *Sent.*, 5.23.14.
- 60 *CJust.* 8.51.2. Tr. by Grubbs 2013: 98.
- 61 Dagron 1984: 419–430.
- 62 Didaché, 2,2, A8. Transl. by Milavec 2004: 5. One of the earliest Christian texts, if we accept Milavec's theory that it is dated to the mid-1st century AD. *Ibid.*: xiii–xiv.
- 63 Tertull. *Ap.* 25.42. Greg. Nyss. *De Hominis Opificio* 29.4.
- 64 August., *Quaestionum in Hept.* I, II; n.80. Dunstan 1984: 40. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae; 64. 1. 1a; 76.1; 1a; 76.3; Dunstan 1984: 41. Jones 2005: 712.
- 65 Tertull. *De An.* 25.5–6.
- 66 Ὁ ἐμβρυοσφάκτης. Tertull. *de An.* 25. Tr. by Lang 2012: 196, note 230.
- 67 Lascaratos J. et al. 2002: 80–83 notes 10–12. The main sources for this account are the 'Lives' of St John Chrysostom, written by anonymous writers in the 5th century AD and two 11th-century authors: the chronicler George Cedrenus and John Zonaras.
- 68 See Lucian's critique of philosophy preachers and Dio Chrysostom's description of street preachers of philosophy, in Malherbe et al. 2014: 706–708.
- 69 *PGM XXXVI* 283–294. Rowlandson 1998: 359, n. 284, *ibid.*, fig. 49.
- 70 Hanson 2008: 106.
- 71 Aubert 1989: 435–436, note 24.
- 72 P. *Mich.* VI 423–424 (Karanis, AD 197) = R107.
- 73 The interpretation of *brephos* in this context as 'stillborn' or 'foetus' can be found in Aubert 1989: 437. Cf. Seidl 1973: 62 n. 1.10.
- 74 Tr. by Rowlandson 1998: 143.
- 75 Aubert 1989: 432. Cf. Pl. *HN* 28.85.
- 76 See above 3.1.3.
- 77 Frankfurter 2006: 54.
- 78 Sen. *Ep.* 124.8.

- 79 Johnston 2001: 97–117.
- 80 Dated mainly to the 3rd–4th century AD, with some earlier ones dating to the 1st–2nd century AD and a few later ones dating to the 5th–7th century AD. The date for each papyrus can be found in Betz 1986: xxiii–xviii.
- 81 *PGM* V.1–53; *PGM* VII.548. Betz 1986; Johnston 2001.
- 82 Dunand 2004: 13–32; Bowen 2003: 166–182; Britton 2010; Dunand and Lichtenberg 2012: 331–349 in Nenna 2012.
- 83 The most complete studies about burials of children in Dynastic and Greco-Roman Egypt are by Spieser 2008 and Nenna 2012.
- 84 The project is funded by the French Agence nationale de la recherche and involves the Centre Camille Jullian, the Archéologies et sciences de l’Antiquité unit, and the Centre d’études Alexandrines.
- 85 Fromageot-Lanièce 2012: 551–560 in Nenna 2012; Nenna 2012: 598. Link to the database: <http://www.mae.u-paris10.fr/ema/>. Last accessed 3 July 2018.
- 86 Nenna 2012.
- 87 Frankfurter 2006: 44.
- 88 Petrie found coffin burials underneath the floor of houses in Kahun. In Abydos some infants were buried in jars underneath the floor of a house. See a complete discussion and bibliography on these infant burials, and many others in urban contexts in the Dynastic Period, in Tristan 2012: 44–49 (in Nenna 2012).
- 89 Britton 2010.
- 90 Family tomb of Neferkhawet and Renennefer, with a small coffin for a child younger than 6 months. Asasif (Thebes), MMA729 excavated in 1935: Snape 2011: 205, fig 13.6.
- 91 Spieser 2008: 514–523, figs 1–8b. Tristan 2012: 34–44, figs 21, 23–28, 30. The wooden coffins were probably boxes for clothes reused as coffins for infants.
- 92 Spieser 2008: 513.
- 93 See Chapter 3.2.
- 94 See, for example, the spell no. 59 in Borghouts 1978: 38.
- 95 Spieser 2008: 524. Tristan 2012: 37–38 fig. 23.
- 96 Spieser 2008: 527.
- 97 None of these were used for foetuses, but a foetus was found in the cachette in a very small undecorated coffin. Spieser 2008: 524.
- 98 The Bes coffins (Cairo JE 29.755; Louvre 1940 and 1943) are about 50 cm tall; the coffin in the shape of Ptah-Sokar-Osiris (BM EA41603) was found in Speos Artemidos and dates to 850 BC: Spieser 2008: 541.
- 99 BM EA41603.
- 100 Ziegler 2012: 61–77 in Nenna 2012.
- 101 Ibid.: 77.
- 102 Adam and Colin in Nenna 2012: 315–329.
- 103 Adam and Colin in Nenna 2012: 328. They also make a comparison with ancient Sudan, even if it seems that the dogs were sacrificed in that case.
- 104 A mummy of a young child without a coffin is at the British Museum (EA54053): the body is carefully and tightly wrapped in coarse linen bandages: Dawson and Gray 1968: 58. Perhaps the body was in a coffin that was lost.
- 105 For instance a foetus in a rectangular wooden coffin found in Tarkhan (Lower Egypt): EA52889. Dawson and Gray 1968: 77.
- 106 Spieser 2008: figs 13–17.
- 107 Spieser 2008: 537–538, fig. 18.
- 108 All the details are in the school’s website: <http://wuerlim.wustl.edu/research/imseg/mummy.html>. Last accessed 3 July 2018.
- 109 Jackowski et al. 2008: 1483, fig. 4. Schlögl and Winzen 2010: 125, n. 85. The mummy is currently lying in a beautifully decorated wooden coffin supported by

four lion paws, which belongs to the Antikenmuseum Basel (Inv. BS Ae 1227). The body is covered by a linen shroud that comes from the Cramer-Sarasin collection in Geneva.

- 110 Jackowski et al. 2008.
- 111 Alix, Boës, Georges and Nenna in Nenna 2012: 79–137.
- 112 See Blaizot 2012: 151–208, in Nenna 2012, a case-study on the high concentration of infant children in the Late Antique *loculus* A1 of chamber B28.3.
- 113 Silhouette 2012: 139–150, in particular 149 in Nenna 2012.
- 114 Alix, Boës, Georges and Nenna in Nenna 2012: 131. See also, in the same book, the case-study by Daszewski and Zych in Nenna 2012: 283–292 on the necropolis of the Romanised population of Marina el Alamein. The burials of infants are in amphorae, but are not isolated from those of adults. Sabah 2012: 253–274 on the Late Roman necropolis of Khalil el Khayat, in which all the newborn babies were buried in pit graves within amphorae.
- 115 Dunand and Lichtenberg 2012: 331–349 in Nenna 2012.
- 116 Ibid.: 348–349.
- 117 Bowen in Nenna 2012: 351–372 in Nenna 2012.
- 118 Bowen in Nenna 2012: 370.
- 119 Germer mentions some baby coffins filled with soil, straw and palm branches in women's burials in the Greco-Roman cemetery of Abu Sir el Meleq. These coffins could be part of a magical ritual to deter these women from coming back and endangering the life of living children. Germer et al. 1994: 86–87. Spieser 2008: 548.
- 120 For instance, the British Museum has two very small coffins that are of the right size to contain a foetus: EA34238 and EA6734. They both date to the Late Dynastic Period but their provenance is unknown. Their funerary use is suggested by the depiction of mummiform Osiris in the coffin. Inside one of the two coffins there is a bundle which might contain the bones of a foetus or be a fake. However, this will remain a speculation unless the bundle will be X-rayed. Private communication by the British Museum curator John Taylor about coffin EA34238 and its bundle.
- 121 Cf. the Introduction, section 3.
- 122 Cf. P. *Petaus* 1 (Ptolemais Hermiou, 14 February 185 AD); P. *Petaus* 2 (Ptolemais Hermiou, 14 February 185 AD); P. *Mich.* III 152–154 (Alexandria, 3 November 148); P. *Mich.* III 169 (Karanis, 29 April 145 AD). The last three in Rowlandson 1998: 90–92. P. *Mich.* III 169 is a birth certificate of two twins registered by their mother as 'fatherless': probably because their father was a Roman soldier that could not recognise them during his military service.
- 123 Τὰ τετρακο(σ)στά. P. *Fay.* 113 (Euhemeria, 100 AD); Monserrat 1996: 33–34; Perpillou-Thomas 1993: 13. See Chapter 5.3.
- 124 Τεσσαρακοστῆον (tempus) in Cens. *De Die Natali* 11.7 (ed. Hultsch 1867). Another feast was the birthday attested, for example, in P. *Oxy.* XXXVI 2791 = R232, 2nd century AD, but the birthday is less important for us here, because it must have followed the first official recognition. See Chapter 5.3.
- 125 Dagron 1984.
- 126 Private communication from an Egyptian friend.
- 127 *BGU* IV 1104, 1–32 (Alexandria, 8 BC) = R129.
- 128 *BGU* IV 1104, 21–25.
- 129 Tr. by Rowlandson 1998: 172.
- 130 Grubbs 2002: 267–268.
- 131 P. *Gen* II 103–104, BL VIII 136. P. *Gen.* are published by Wehrli 1986: 76–80. For corrections see Wehrli in *ZPE* 67 (1987) 117–118; BL VIII, 13; IX, 91. For a translation see Rowlandson 1998, 289–291; discussion *ibid.*, and in Hanson 2000: 149–165.
- 132 *Dig.* 37, 9, 1, 17–24; *Dig.* 26, 5, 20; *Dig.* 27, 10, 8; *Dig.* 26, 7, 48. Rowlandson 1998: 289–291; Grubbs 2002: 268–269.

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- 133 This practice is reported in the Digest and seems to have been normally applied in these cases, but this Egyptian source is the only attestation of its actual application.
- 134 Grubbs 2002: 220–221.
- 135 P. *Oxy.* X 1273, columns 33–36 (Oxyrhynchos, AD 260).
- 136 Tr. by Grubbs 2002: 127–128.
- 137 Grubbs 2002: 128.
- 138 *SB XVI I* 2720, 1–20 (Arsinoite Nome, 142 BC) = R125.
- 139 Tr. by Bagnall and Derow 2004: 205, n. 142.
- 140 The role of the mother as guardian of her child in *SB XVI I* 2720 is further discussed, in detail, by Montevicchi 1981: 103–115.
- 141 *BGU VIII* 1848 (Herakleopolite nome, 48–46 BC). R 128.
- 142 *BGU VIII* 1848, 15–16. ‘καὶ ὥς μεταλαμβάνωι ἀστοργότερον διακείμενος πρὸς με καὶ τὸ τέκνον’.

5 Pollution and purification in women's reproduction

The previous chapters have shown that both pregnant women and children went through a liminal social and existential condition. However, another aspect needs to be investigated in order to explain the nature of childbirth's liminality. Childbearing women and children both experienced a highly 'polluting' natural event that required a temporary separation from society, which was called 'confinement'. In this chapter, I will discuss what 'pollution' was in Greco-Roman Egypt, and how it could be related to childbirth and other phases of women's reproduction.

5.1 Pollution and purity

Pollution or impurity and 'being pure' are polar opposites in most ancient and modern cultures. The act of becoming pure, the purification, is a fundamental ritual act that in many ancient and modern societies is aimed at reconciling a momentary fracture between human and divine. What is believed to make men and women impure is their immoral behaviour and their contact with bodily fluids.

In many ancient societies, pollution was sanctioned by special rules, called sacred laws, formed by the society to regulate the relationship between the human and the divine. These laws were written at the entrance to sacred spaces like temples or sanctuaries, and are attested in Greece, Dynastic Egypt, Greco-Roman Egypt and in Jewish culture. In Greece, a Hippocratic statement attests that an act of purification was required from anyone entering a sanctuary:

We ourselves both affix boundaries to the sanctuaries and the sacred precincts of the gods in order that no one may cross them unless he is pure and, upon entering, sprinkle ourselves with water not as if defiling ourselves but as ridding ourselves from any pre-existing pollution we may have.¹

In all the cultures considered in this chapter, the dialogue between human and divine required a sacred space where a god could reach the person without being contaminated by human impurity. According to these sacred laws, accessing a sacred area while impure could be threatening not only for the individual but also for society as a whole: the god was believed to become angry with the community

and spread disease and barrenness of women and crops if this occurred. In addition, once the sacred space had been violated, it could no longer be used to communicate with the god. Every sacred space was a pivotal space for maintaining the unity of communities, and so the sacred laws must have been generally perceived not as oppressive limitations, but as fundamental rules designed to protect a common good.

Many ancient societies condemned rape or murder as serious acts of impiety which may permanently separate the perpetrators from the divine. On the contrary, physical impurities caused by sexual intercourse, menstruation, childbirth, miscarriage, physical ailments, and care for the dead were only temporarily polluting because they were not morally wrong. While it is evident the reason why a crime could cause a sacred impurity, it is less clear why natural acts like sexual intercourse were deemed to be impure. Many purification rituals before access to sacred areas were focused around bathing or washing the hands or the feet, so hygiene was certainly an important component of purity. However, pollution was more than actual dirt, especially when it concerned the relationship with the divine. Mary Douglas argued that hygiene was not the main concern behind impurity connected with reproduction and death. She also gives us a good definition of dirt:

If we can abstract pathogenity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as 'matter out of place' . . . it implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt is never a unique isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so-far ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements . . . Our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.²

Therefore, communities established boundaries which limited their lives, but at the same time gave them a sense of protection and integrity. The stronger boundaries of sacred laws were intended to safeguard the relationship with the divine from the impurities of human nature. As Nihan suggested talking about the book of Leviticus,³ human beings were separated from the divine by acts that were peculiar to the human condition: birth, reproduction and death. Human beings cannot avoid being impure with these natural acts, but ritual purification allows them to wash away this imperfection and get as close as they can to the divine.



Many ancient societies and, in particular, Egyptian society, had two main places where they could have contact with the divine: the temple and the house. Even though the temple was at the heart of the community, especially in Jewish culture, the house was the main space for daily dialogue with the divine. However, the domestic space was also the place where reproduction and death took place, creating constant disruptions between humanity and the deity. It is difficult to understand how men and women dealt with these temporary 'domestic' impurities, and whether these impurities could contaminate either the entire house, only the room where the impure person stayed or only the impure person, and not the

space. It is likely each household had its own private and uncoded sacred laws, which regulated the relationship between its inhabitants and the gods but also with the external world. Many documents of different types incidentally describe attitudes towards menstruation, sex and childbirth, giving an idea about how people, and especially women, dealt with such common pollution.

In ancient Greece, the morally pure person is called *καθαρός* while the physically pure is called *ἄγνός*.⁴ Everybody always had to be morally pure, while physical purity was required only to establish contact with the divine. The action of becoming *ἄγνός* was not explicitly prescribed in private cults, not because it was unimportant, but, on the contrary, because it was so common that it was probably taken for granted.⁵ Conversely, sacred laws were written down in temples, listing specific types of pollution and related rituals. Temple laws indicated the source of pollution, followed by the number of days needed for purification.

As in Greek law, the Old Testament book of Leviticus also shows a distinction between moral and physical impurity. Ailments, death and reproductive processes were *tô'ēbā* (abominations) and made both men and women *ṭāmē*, physically unclean. The opposite of *ṭāmē* was *ṭāhōr*, meaning physically clean and suitable for the temple.⁶

Different words used for physical and moral purity appear again in the Hittite texts, where the morally pure are called *shuppi* and the physically pure *parkhua*.⁷


In the Egyptian language it is more difficult to identify two distinct words for moral and physical purity. The adjective commonly used is  *wʿb*, which seems to indicate both moral and physical purity.⁸ In fact, as we will see at the end of this chapter, a woman that purifies her physical impurity after childbirth is defined as *wʿb*. It is also difficult to distinguish the terms that mean abomination: the main term used is  *bw.t*,⁹ which means 'abomination' in Egyptian sacred laws.¹⁰

The Jewish community is the only one that has codified their sacred family laws since the Greco-Roman Period. The laws of family purity, still followed today by some Jewish communities, are called *tohorat ha-mishpacha*. These laws were written by the rabbis and prescribed the right behaviour for families in order to avoid dangerous threats caused by impurity. One of the most dangerous impurities in the family is the *niddah*, a menstruating or childbearing woman. The main prescription described in Leviticus for *niddah* is sexual avoidance;¹¹ as well as this, according to the Mishnah, seven days after menstruation, women had to undergo a purifying bath, in pools called *miqwa-ot*.¹² *Miqwa-ot* pools were used by the Jews in Palestine from the Roman Period, with the earliest archaeologically attested one dated to the 1st century BC.¹³

The practice of washing away pollution was certainly practised by Jewish families in Greco-Roman Egypt too, as is suggested by Philo of Alexandria. Philo mentions the laws of Leviticus 15:18, according to which the two spouses had to purify themselves with ablutions after their sexual intercourse. However, Philo does not mention that Egyptian Jews used the *miqwa-ot* pool. He instead says that the couple purified themselves with lustrations (*λουτροῖς*) and ablutions (*περιρραντηρίοις*).¹⁴ The *λουτρά* are lustrations with a pot; Philo also describes

illustrations when he claims that prostitutes could not be purified ‘with any baths or washings’ (καθαρίοις καὶ λουτροῖς).¹⁵ It has been suggested that Philo was following the Jewish purity law, and by replacing the *miqwa-ot* with the λουτροί, he was describing a common kind of ablution in Hellenised Egypt.¹⁶ Assuming that Jewish Law in Egypt adapted itself to local practices, we may see in Philo’s account a very valuable indirect attestation of Hellenistic-Egyptian private purification rituals after sexual intercourse, and possibly the method used after menstruation and childbirth as well.

5.2 Pollution of menstruation

Pollution from menstruation is the most discussed pollution among Egyptologists. This is because the term ‘menstruation’,  *hsmn(.t)*,¹⁷ is frequently mentioned in many kinds of ancient Egyptian documents, from medical writings to sacred texts, and it seems to have been consistently used from the Dynastic until the Ptolemaic Period.

The variety of documents that describe it offers us a range of useful perspectives as to how ancient Egyptians considered menstruation. The most relevant sources for us here are those that suggest there was a taboo associated with menstruation.

The ancient Egyptian sources that more explicitly deal with the menstrual taboo are the Egyptian sacred laws called ‘cult-monographs’ which listed all the specific religious prohibitions (against certain actions, or certain foods) for each Egyptian nome and its capital. These are dated to the Ptolemaic Period, but may have antecedents in the Dynastic era.¹⁸ These texts are defined by Frandsen as:

Manuals and lists giving us the essentials of the composition of the multiple visions of the Egyptian cosmos . . . Most importantly each cosmos also had an element of evil, a *bwt*, a term designating both the ‘evil’ and the interdiction against it.¹⁹

From this explanation, he concludes that the evil, the *bwt*, for Egyptians was an essential part of the formation of the cosmos, but at the same time was not allowed to be violated, otherwise the consequences for people would have been dramatic. Three nomes of Egypt indicated a ‘menstruating woman’ as a *bwt*.²⁰ In certain instances, the menstruating woman is associated with the heart of a black bull or the heart of a cow. Unfortunately, the name of any specific temple for which menstruating women were banned from is not indicated. However, in at least one case, an entire town had the menstruating woman as the only abomination: the capital of the Eighteenth Upper Egyptian nome, *Hwt nswt*.²¹ This probably meant that in that town priests could not have contact with menstruating women or priestesses could not have access to any temple ritual while menstruating.²²

Greek sacred laws are clearer about menstruation than the corresponding Egyptian law. In the Greek sacred law of Megalopolis, menstruating women were polluted and had to wait seven days, probably from the end of menstruation, before they could enter the temple of Isis, Sarapis and Anoubis:

Stele of Isis and Sarapis. God! Good luck. A sanctuary sacred to Isis, Sarapis, Anoubis. Whoever wishes to sacrifice shall enter the sanctuary, being pure: From childbirth on the ninth day; from an abortion, for forty-four days; from menstruation, on the seventh day; from bloodshed(?), for seven days; from (eating) goat meat and mutton, on the third (day); from other foods, having washed oneself from the head down, on the same day; from sexual intercourse, on the same day, having washed oneself; from . . . on the same day, having washed oneself . . . no one shall enter(?) . . . enter . . .²³

It is important to note that these rules are prescribed for Egyptian gods worshipped in Greece, maybe underlying a specific link between these deities and the impurity of female blood. This Arcadian law also adopts an unusual term for menstruation: τὰ φυσικά, instead of the more common γυναικεῖα and καταμήνια.²⁴

It has been claimed that the ‘abomination’ of menstruating women in the nomes of Upper Egypt could be associated with the cult of the triad of Isis, Osiris and various manifestations of Horus.²⁵ However, the cult of Isis and Sarapis in Megalopolis must have been extensively Hellenised, and likely no longer followed the same religious prescriptions stated in the above-mentioned Egyptian case-monographs.

While this particular sacred law concerns an Egyptian cult in Greece, there is also a sacred law concerning menstruation in a Greek cult practised in Egypt. This sacred law, dating from the 1st century BC, comes from Ptolemais, a city founded in Upper Egypt as a Greek city. The law was inscribed on a small conical basalt column and prescribed ‘the number of days of purificatory intermission required after certain acts or events before entering a sanctuary’.²⁶ The laws concerned the cult of a Greek deity, perhaps Asklepios.²⁷ The sacred law from Ptolemais, like the one from Megalopolis, prescribed seven days of intermission from the sanctuary due to menstruation:

After menstruation, 7 (After sex with) a men, 2, and [she shall bring?] myrtle.²⁸

These sacred laws, from Arcadia and Egypt, both give the same number of days prescribed for impurity after menstruation. The number seven recurs in other Greek sacred laws that have nothing to do with Egypt,²⁹ suggesting that this number is a Greek requirement. Another Greek element in the sacred law of Ptolemais is the use of myrtle, a typically Greek item of propitiation.

Nevertheless, the sacred laws give only us a partial idea of the situation surrounding the menstruation taboo, as these laws only regulated access to the temple, not people’s behaviour within domestic space. Therefore, it is important to consider other documents that mention menstruation, for instance, some Egyptian and Greek medical texts show how menstruation was seen in Egypt in the Dynastic and Greco-Roman Periods. Also there are non-medical texts that describe menstrual blood as an ingredient for several purposes, there are texts that show men’s attitude towards menstruating women or towards menstrual blood, as well as texts that show how women themselves behaved during menstruation.

The Egyptians had certainly understood, well before the Hippocratics, that the absence of menstruation could derive from a pregnancy:

I was taken as a wife to the house of Naneferkaptah . . . He slept with me that night . . . and we loved each other. When my time of *hsmn* came, I made no more *hsmn*.³⁰

Ancient Egyptian medicine was based on the belief that all the parts of a woman's body were connected, and all the orifices of their body communicated through an open channel. The Egyptian medical papyri show that the channel between the vagina and the mouth had to be free from obstructions, otherwise the woman could not conceive; the Egyptian medical papyri report that the bodily channel of a woman was free if it was possible to smell from her mouth the garlic put in her vagina the day before.³¹ Hippocratic tradition has a similar text.³² Establishing a comparison between the ancient Egyptian and Hippocratic tradition is useful because the Hippocratic treatises dealt extensively with menstruation.³³ The opening of the bodily channel, guaranteed a regular flowing of the menses and the ability to conceive. The flowing of menstruation was believed to be helped by childbirth and sexual intercourse.³⁴ The Hippocratics, unlike the Egyptian papyri, also claim that the channel of a woman's body could be obstructed by the movement of the womb, provoking a pathological condition in women characterised by several symptoms.³⁵

A clear similarity between the Hippocratics and Egyptian medicine though, is that menstruation means not only bleeding but also purification.³⁶ However, only the Greek idea of menstruation as purification is explicitly attested; the Hippocratics and Aristotle claim that the menses purified women's bodies from an excess of blood, which had been produced to nurture the child but had not been used.³⁷ The blood of menstruation was a sort of imperfect counterpart to the male seed, because it was not warm enough and not of the right consistency. Therefore, woman had to purify themselves by getting rid of this matter. Soon after menstruation, women's bodies were considered completely purified, and for this reason, they were considered at the peak of their monthly fertility. Today we know that this is not true, because ovulation happens about two weeks after the beginning of the menstruation, but neither the ancient Egyptians nor the Hippocratic doctors had the chance to understand such a concealed event.

Although the menstrual blood was regarded as impure it was not 'useless', indeed, it was considered by Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, as an ideal ingredient of medical products, magical potions and even agriculture. In Egyptian papyri, menstrual blood is mentioned as a medical ingredient, for instance, as a cure for sagging breasts.³⁸ In Greco-Egyptian magic, menstrual blood was associated with the rituals used to invoke the moon goddess. Aubert offers an interesting interpretation of a 3rd century AD magical papyrus from Egypt.³⁹ This papyrus contains a spell which invokes the moon to induce menstruation; the words of the spell are arranged around what seems to be the image of a heart. The spell says:

‘Let the genitals and the womb of her, NN, be open, and let her become bloody by night and day.’ And [these things must be written] in sheep’s blood, and recite before nightfall, the offerings / (?) . . . first she harmed . . . and bury it near sumac, or near . . . on a slip of papyrus.⁴⁰

Aubert reinterpreted the heart image on the spell as female genitalia, and argued that the ink to write the spell, the ‘sheep’ blood (ἀρν[εῖω] χρῶ αἵματι), was instead menstrual blood (αἰσχροῦ αἵματι).⁴¹

Roman popular culture expresses a genuine fear of menstrual blood, which was believed to have ‘evil effects’ on minerals, crops and people, and was thought to provoke miscarriage in women and female animals. Columella attributed to the Greeks the magical use of menstrual blood, calling it ‘Dardanian art’.⁴² He also reported a Greek source in which the menstrual blood of a virgin was used as a remedy to kill caterpillars in the crops.⁴³ Columella called menstrual blood *obscaenum cruor*, probably an equivalent to the αἰσχροῦ αἷμα in the Greek spell from Egypt mentioned above.

Pliny believed that menstrual blood could not be destroyed even by fire;⁴⁴ however, it could also have curative effects against diseases like epilepsy,⁴⁵ rabies and fever.⁴⁶ Blood was also believed to have protective effects if it was smeared on the doors of houses or on a magical object.⁴⁷ A menstrual woman alone was believed to have power to repel a storm at sea.⁴⁸

Egyptian men rarely showed an open attitude of disgust towards menstruating women. However, in the *Satire of the Trades*, the washerman is considered among the lowest ranking in Egyptian society because he ‘sets himself to do the loincloth of a woman having her period’.⁴⁹ An explicit episode of disgust towards menstruation comes from Ptolemaic Egypt, reported by the 5th century AD philosopher Damascius.⁵⁰ The philosopher describes an episode from the life of the Alexandrian female philosopher Hypatia, who disgusted a suitor by showing him her rags stained with her menstrual blood. In this extreme way, she managed to prove to him that what he called love was instead a superficial physical attraction.

Some documents from the Near East and ancient Egypt show habits developed by women during menstruation. Some suggest that menstruating women might have somehow isolated themselves from the other occupants of the house. For instance, Mesopotamian sources called the menstruating woman *harištu*, which meant ‘reclusive woman’ or ‘made distant’.⁵¹ Documentation from Mari in Syria tells us about a queen called Šibtu, who had to stay away from her husband, and lived in a different part of the Royal Palace during her menstrual period. Šibtu’s father describes the new condition of his daughter in this way:

My daughter’s belongings may be placed in her apartment, but she should live with her husband, and leave for 5 or 6 days (a month) to live in her apartment.⁵²

In Egypt only one Dynastic source, the hieratic ostrakon OIM 13512 (published and translated by Terry Wilfong),⁵³ seems to indicate possible seclusion for

menstruation. According to Wilfong, this ostrakon describes a group of women from the workmen's village of Deir el-Medina, who left their house all together to reach a sort of communal building where they were supposed to menstruate:⁵⁴

- 1) *H3t-sp 9 4 3ht 13 hrw n pry ir.n t3y 8 hm.wt r-b[nr r/m]*
 - 2) *[t3] s.t hm.wt iw.w m hsmn.t iw.w hr ph r-š3^c ph(wy) n pr [n]tt [. . .]*
 - 3) *[. . .] p3 3 inb*
- 1) *Year 9, fourth month of the season of Inundation, day 13: The day these eight women came out [to/from*
 - 2) *the] place of women while they are menstruating. They got as far as the rear of the house which . . .*
 - 3) *. . . the three walls*

Between this NK source and the Ptolemaic Period, there is no mention of such an activity, so it is difficult to say whether there was any ongoing practice from the Dynastic Period.

Two Demotic legal documents from the same Theban family attest to the seclusion of menstruating women in the early Ptolemaic Period. The first document is a contract dated to 267 BC,⁵⁵ and, according to Revillout and Brugsch,⁵⁶ contains the donation of a woman to her two sons. The son Patma, *pastophoros* of Amun-Apis, receives the eastern part of the house, while Patma's brother Panas receives the western part. The contract explains which entrance door the two brothers were allowed to use, where they could work and the room where their wives could perform their purification:

mtw=k pr r bnr n (?) p3 r3 mtr n p3 ^c.wj ntj hrj mtw=k šm r hrj hr p3 trt n p3 ^c.wj ntj hrj r d3d3 [n3j=k] m3^c.w ntj hrj mtw=k hms hn t3 hjt.t n p3 ^c.wj ntj hrj r h t3 pš.t mtw n3j=k s.hm.t.w ir hsmn n t3 hrhr.t r h t3 pš.t mtw=k ir wp.t.⁵⁷

And you should go out of the middle door of the above house. You should go up on the stairs of the above house on [your] above spaces. You should inhabit the vestibule of the house above corresponding to half. **Your women should make purification (= menstruating?) in the women's room** corresponding to the half. You should work . . .⁵⁸

In a second contract, drawn up in 249 BC, Patma has to give a sum to his wife, and he declares that if he is not able to pay it in 36 months or three years, he will donate to her the eastern part of the house that he received from his mother:⁵⁹

mtw(=t) pr r bnr p3 r3 mtr n p3 ^c.wj ntj hrj mtw=t šm r hrj hr p3 trt r d3d3 t3j=t pš.t n ^c.wj ntj hrj mtw=t hms hn t3 hjt.t n p3 ^c.wj ntj hrj r h t3 pš.t mtw=t ir hsmn n t3 hljl.t n p3 ^c.wj ntj hrj r h t3 pš.t mtw=t ir wp.t.⁶⁰

And you should go out of the middle door of the house above. You should give up on the steps of the above house on [your] above spaces. You should inhabit the vestibule of the house above corresponding to half. **You should**

make purification (= menstruate?) in the women's room of the house above corresponding to the half. You should work . . .⁶¹

These contracts suggest that there was a practice of purification or seclusion for menstruation during the early Ptolemaic Period, and that it took place in a room called *hrhr.t*⁶² or *hlyl.t*.⁶³

There is more evidence for the use of this room in Ptolemaic Thebes, from an earlier papyrus dating to 324 BC,⁶⁴ belonging to the archive of Teineni, daughter of Teos, a choachytess (funerary priestess) from the town. A great grandfather of Teineni, Tjuakhy, who worked as a carpenter at the temple of Amon, bequeathed to his various children and grandsons several shares of his property. In exchange, he obliged them to pay for his burial.⁶⁵ In this contract, the most relevant parts of the house are mentioned in the shares, and one of them seems to be the *hrr(.t)*.⁶⁶ I will quote the parts of the contract where Tjuakhy donates a part of his property to his eldest son and to his grandson (I will leave the word *hrr* untranslated because I will discuss its meaning later):

My eldest son I have given you the share of the entry (*hyt*), its entire roof, and the share of the stairs (*trt*), and the share of the *hrr*, and the share of the courtyard (*inh*) . . . while there belongs to . . . Pasomtous son of Kolluthes, the southern side/room (*ry.t*) of this house and the share of the entry and the share of the stairs (*trt*) and the share of the *hrr*, and the share of the courtyard (*inh*).⁶⁷

The *Chicago Demotic Dictionary* reports that the *hrr* should be interpreted as 'the room where women carried on their menstrual needs'.⁶⁸ The evidence for this interpretation is given by the other group of papyri from Thebes that I mentioned above.⁶⁹ However, the function of the *hrr* as a place for menstruating women is not explicitly mentioned in this earlier papyrus. Thus, I think it is necessary to be careful before attributing the *hrr* with only this specific function. In the next chapter, I will investigate which kind of room could be termed the *hrr*, while also discussing why this room was used by women during menstruation.

Leaving aside, for now, the interpretation of this room, I will first compare the sources I presented above in this section. It is possible to find some elements of continuity between the NK ostrakon OIM 13512 and the Ptolemaic papyri mentioned above:

- Both the ostrakon and the Ptolemaic documents come from the south of Egypt.
- Both the ostrakon and the Ptolemaic documents are written by Egyptian families.⁷⁰ In fact, in the Ptolemaic documents all the names are Egyptian, indicating no intermarriage with Greeks or other foreigners. Maybe some of them could speak and write Greek, but they decided to have these contracts drawn up in Demotic, maybe in order to be understood by all the members of their family.⁷¹

- As such, it may be the case that private practices of purification during menstruation did not change much in Upper Egypt between the NK and Ptolemaic Periods.
- However, if we follow Wilfong's interpretation, the practice of purification/seclusion of menstruating women attested in the NK ostrakon OIM 13512 was not the same as the Ptolemaic practice described in the papyri from Thebes. The Ptolemaic purification/seclusion area was in a room of the house, while in the NK ostrakon the eight women left their homes to gather at a communal place where they could menstruate.
- Women leaving the house during menstruation is a practice still attested today in Africa, where some tribes send menstruating women away from the home to an external hut. This practice is not associated with disgust or fear of menstrual blood, but rather with the men's need to control women's fertility. The event of ovulation is concealed in human beings, and the onset of menstruation is the only clear signal that men can recognise to know when their women are ready to conceive. This correlation between menstrual huts and men's control over conception is confirmed by modern studies on the Dogon women of Mali⁷² and on the Falasha women in Ethiopia,⁷³ showing that both these societies are strongly controlled by men. Indeed, Dogon women are threatened with supernatural fears of barrenness and damage to the community if they refuse to go to the huts.⁷⁴

Yet, as I showed in Chapter 1, Egyptian women in the Dynastic Period occupied a high social position, legally equal to men, and so it seems unlikely that they were forced to leave their home while they were menstruating. This does not mean that they did not have some belief in the ritual impurity of menstruation, though. Therefore, I think that the text of ostrakon OIM 13512, as presented and translated by Wilfong,⁷⁵ could be slightly reinterpreted as the story of a group of eight women who do not *go together to a special place of women* but rather *come out from* it.

8 ḥm.wt r-b[nr m] | [t3] s.t ḥm.wt iw.w m ḥsmn.t.

eight women came out **from** the place of women while they are menstruating.

Translating the preposition *m* as 'from' instead of 'to' means that the eight women were not necessarily coming out from the same communal place; each one of them could have had her own special room at home. This explanation would not only fit in more with what we know about Egyptian society than menstrual huts, but it would also signify a precedent for the Theban Ptolemaic documents that talk about a room for menstruating women *in the house*.

The reason for these women meeting in the Dynastic Period outside their homes and going to the rear of a house could be quite simple: during menstruation, they needed to wash and purify, so they could have gone to collect some water from a place outside their homes, perhaps the water cistern just outside the village.

The practice of purification during and after menstruation was certainly Egyptian, but later sources indicate that this idea might have been adopted by Greek families as well, and maybe later by Byzantine era families. It is difficult to tell whether the Greeks had a similar practice in their own private homes. Judging by the Greek sacred laws though, it may be that menstruating women had no access to some temples and were forbidden from having intercourse with men who wanted to go to one. In private family life, if we consider the Greek medical idea of menstruation, it is likely that men avoided sexual contact with women in a period during which they were considered impure.

5.3 Pollution from childbirth and postpartum

The impurity of mothers and babies is never explicitly defined in Dynastic Egypt. The purification of the child started before that of the mother because the newborn baby was bathed soon after its birth.⁷⁶ Today in Egypt, in the traditional ritual of the Sebou, children receive the second and last purification that ends their confinement after seven days.⁷⁷

In Dynastic Egypt, a queen called Ruddjedet had to stay in confinement for fourteen days:

Rd-ddt w^cb.n^s m w^cb n hrw 14.

Ruddjedet became pure in a purification of fourteen days.⁷⁸


The purification of the mother at the end of confinement was celebrated by her relatives. Ruddjedet celebrated with her husband and organised a feast in her home. In O. *Michaelides* 48, a hieratic ostrakon from Deir el-Medina, a father celebrated ‘the purification for his daughter’: *p3 sw^cb n t3y^fšr[. . .]*.⁷⁹ It is not certain whether the purification in this case is necessarily connected with childbirth, and not another ritual (coming of age?) or with menstruation. However, the term *sw^cb* is used instead of *hsmn*, the term normally used for menstruation.

Certainly, the condition of prolonged bleeding put women in postpartum in a similar situation to those during menstruation. It is not by chance that both confinement and menstruation are designated with terms that mean purification. Both the terms *w^cb* and *hsmn*, used for confinement and menstruation respectively, contain a hieroglyph showing water poured from a container:

 *w^cb* and  *hsmn*


In addition, the term *hsmn*, written in other ways, also means purification, natron and water basin with pitcher:

 ‘purification’, ‘to cleanse’ (*Wb.* III, 163.3–6; *Ptol. Lexikon*, 479)

 ‘natron’

 ‘water basin with pitcher’ (*Wb.* III, 163.7)

A connection between purification and blood is also suggested by the similar way that the word ‘blood’ is written:

 *snf* (*Wb.* III, 459.2–14)

In Hippocratic medicine and in Aristotle both menstruation and λόγια (postpartum blood discharge) are called κάθαρσις (purification),⁸⁰ suggesting a similar Greek understanding and perception of both phenomena. The Hippocratic treatises saw menstrual blood as the element that nurtured the child in the womb: during pregnancy, the blood would flow into the womb to nurture the embryo but when the womb opened for childbirth, the excess of blood stored during the first weeks of pregnancy would come out as λόγια.⁸¹ If a woman did not conceive, her body would completely expel the blood, cleansing itself before another cycle. The Hippocratics do not explicitly mention a postpartum pollution but, as I have shown, Greek sacred laws attest to this belief in many parts of the Greek world. However, the earliest sources that attest this kind of pollution are from the Near East.

The populations of the Near East had intense contacts with Egypt since the Dynastic Period, while the relationship between Egypt and the Greek world intensified from the Late Period. It is difficult to know how birth practices spread among these populations, yet it is likely that Near Eastern and Greek immigrants who arrived in Egypt in the Late Period found some practices connected with birth with which they were already familiar.

Near Eastern sources are a valuable comparison with those from Egypt, because they offer us information not only about the length of postpartum confinement, but also the status of the ‘impure woman’. In Babylonian texts, women who have just given birth are called ‘tabooed’, *musukkatu*, or ‘dirty’, *urruštu*. Interestingly, both these terms indicate at the same time the pollution of menstruation and the pollution of childbirth.⁸² Impurity seems to have lasted about a month.

A Babylonian incantation, preserved in several versions,⁸³ mentions together a menstruating woman and a woman who has given birth:

May they draw water from Ajabba, the wide sea, into which a *harištu* has not descended, in which a tabooed woman has not washed her hands.⁸⁴

Two other sources about the impurity of women who have given birth exist; the first is an omen based on the appearance of the liver:

A birthgiving woman (*harištu*) will come before my gate.⁸⁵

There also exists an instruction for an exorcist:

(During) one month in which she gives birth, you shall not see her.⁸⁶

This instruction clearly states that the confinement has to last for about a month, more or less the time required for a normal recovery from the postpartum. The

book of Leviticus also deals with pollution from childbirth, associating it with pollution from menstruation:

If a woman conceives, and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean.⁸⁷

The ancient Greek sources that describe pollution from childbirth the most are the sacred laws. In some of these texts, women are associated with animals like dogs, donkeys and flies because they are considered to be equally unable to control their own body during childbirth and miscarriage.⁸⁸ For instance, a sacred law from Asia Minor warns about ‘recent contact with a corpse, a woman in childbed, or a parturient dog’,⁸⁹ and a sanctuary at Lindos posted a sign prohibiting ‘a man in recent contact with the miscarriage of a woman, dog, or donkey’ from the sacred area.⁹⁰

The idea of childbirth presented by the Greek sacred laws, derives from a wider idea of postpartum pollution as a source of μιάσμα,⁹¹ a contamination for the woman herself, but also for the people who have contact with her. The short interdiction for people having contact with a woman who had just given birth often merely said: (prescription for a person coming) ‘from the (contact with a) female giving (or having given) birth’. The terms used to define her are: ἀπὸ λεχοῦς⁹² and ἀπὸ τεκοῦσας.⁹³ Polluted women also endangered the sacred space of sanctuaries and the outcome of games dedicated to Greek deities like Herakles,⁹⁴ but also the space and the inhabitants of private houses.

According to a Greek sacred law from Cyrene, a woman in childbed polluted her own roof, and whoever entered the house was polluted for three days. The woman herself was the one that has the most pollution:

The woman in childbed shall pollute the roof . . . she shall not pollute (anyone) outside the roof unless he comes in. The man who is inside, he himself shall be polluted for three days, but he shall not pollute anyone else, not wherever this man goes.⁹⁵

This description of the impurity of women after childbirth could be compared with a passage from Euripides’s *Electra*, where the protagonist Electra pretends to have given birth and to observe a period of purification:

Πρ. πότερα πάλαι τεκοῦσαν ἢ νεωστὶ δῆ;
 Ηλ. δέχ’ ἡλίους, ἐν οἷσιν ἄγνεύει λεχώ.⁹⁶

Old Man: . . . have you given birth some time ago, or quite recently?

Electra: Ten days ago, in which a woman who has given birth (λεχώ) stays pure (ἄγνεύει).⁹⁷

The verb ἄγνεύω indicates that Electra had to purify herself for ten days, but that she also had to stay pure. As the word ἄγνεία meant ‘purity’ but also ‘chastity’, it is likely that postpartum purification involved sexual abstinence as well.

The special requirements for Electra's purity are also evident in a later part of the tragedy where Electra's mother Clytemnestra visits her daughter and is surprised to find her dishevelled:

σὺ δ' ὧδ' ἄλουτος καὶ δυσείματος χροῖα
λεχὼ νεογνῶν ἐκ τόκων πεπαυμένη;⁹⁸

You, a woman who has just given birth (λεχώ)—why is your body (χροῖα) so unwashed (ἄλουτος) and meanly clad (δυσείματος)?⁹⁹

Greek families who experienced a recent birth marked their doors to announce a joyful event, but possibly to prevent early visits. The door mark varied depending on the gender of the child: in Attika, a wreath of olive was hung for a boy and a piece of woollen fleece for a girl.¹⁰⁰

The first attestation in Greco-Roman Egypt of postpartum impurity is a Greek sacred law found in Ptolemais:¹⁰¹

Men who enter into the [sanctuary] must wait to be pure in accordance with the following: For one's own [or another's] illness, 7 days. For death . . . x (days) . . . For] miscarriage . . . x (days). The man?] of (a woman) who has given birth and is nursing, [x (days)]. And if she exposes (the child), 14. Men after (sex with) a woman, 2. Women as in the case of men. After (?) miscarriage, 40 [After . . . x (days)]. A woman who gives birth and is nursing, 40. If she exposes the child, [x]. After menstruation, 7. (After sex with) a man, 2, and [she shall bring?] myrtle.¹⁰²

Pomeroy¹⁰³ pointed out that this sacred law from Ptolemais is the only attestation in Ptolemaic Egypt of a Greek rule concerning postpartum pollution, and so it could have been just a local religious ruling rather than a wider Egyptian practice. Indeed, many Egyptologists agree that Egyptian sacred laws are local phenomena because the *bwt* (abominations) are peculiar to each place and linked to the nature of the local god.¹⁰⁴

However, this inscription from Ptolemais is not the only Greek sacred law from Egypt that reports an interdiction against sex, postpartum and menstruation. An inscription from the temple of Esna presents a long list of interdictions including this:

Be pure from a woman in a purification (period) of nine days and of each taboo in a purification (period) of four days'. If he acts this way, he can enter the temple at the door which is at the side of the pylon tower, after purifying himself as well as his clothes in the lake.¹⁰⁵

A more obscure attestation of the taboo concerning contact with women is found in the Ptolemaic Demotic text known as the *Book of Thoth*, which contains some prescriptions for the initiation of a scribe:

Is there a woman for you? Do you have any daughters? Then take care! . . . The one loving wisdom says: 'I know the taboos which are in the chamber of darkness: I have come free of them'.¹⁰⁶

The pollution here is not specified, but it cannot be caused just by sexual intercourse because the scribe is also warned against contact with his own daughter.

These religious texts from Ptolemais, Esna and in the *Book of Thoth*, show that in some Greco-Roman Period Egyptian temples there were at least five taboos concerning women: menstruation, sexual intercourse, childbirth, miscarriage and exposure of children.

However, attestations of postpartum pollution and confinement are not limited to sacred laws in the Greco-Roman Period. A Greek papyrus dating two centuries later than the law from Ptolemais, shows that the tradition of the feast at the end of confinement survived from the Dynastic into the Greco-Roman era. This papyrus is a letter written by Lucius Bellienus Gemellus, a Roman veteran, to his son Sabinus, at the time of the emperor Trajan:

καὶ τῇι ιη εἰς ιθ τῇ πόλι πέμσις εἰκθύας (δραχμῶν) ιβ ἐπὶ τὰ τετρακοστὰ τοῦ μικροῦ [- ca.11 - ο]ιειοῦ Γεμέλλης.¹⁰⁷

On the 18th or 19th of Choiak, send to the city twelve drachmas worth of fish for the fortieth day festival of the little boy . . . son of Gemella.¹⁰⁸

The feast after the forty days of confinement is also mentioned by Censorinus, who wrote his 'De Die Natali' to celebrate the birthday of a Roman senator.¹⁰⁹ Censorinus calls it the feast of the fortieth day and describes it as a moment of relief because both women and children are out of danger and the mother, being no longer impure, may enter the temple again:

Itaque ut alterius partus origo in sex est diebus, post quos semen in sanguinem vertitur, ita huius in septem; et ut ibi quinque et triginta diebus infans membratur, ita hic pro portione diebus fere quadraginta; quare **in Graecia** dies habent quadragensimos insignes. Namque praegnans ante diem quadragensimum non prodit in fanum, et post partum quadraginta diebus pleraeque fetae graviores sunt nec sanguinem interdum continent, et parvoli ferme per hos [fere] morbidi sine risu nec sine periculo sunt. Ob quam causam, cum is dies praeteriit, **diem festum solent agitare**, quod **tempus appellant τεσσαρακοσταῖον**.¹¹⁰

Thus, as the primitive element in the first pregnancy, takes six days, after which the seed turns into blood; Similarly, in the second gestation, it takes seven: and as in the first case, the child's formation is complete at the end of thirty-five days. Similarly, in the second case, it is only after about forty days. That's why the number of forty days is remarkable **in Greece**: as the woman in childbirth cannot enter in the temple before the fortieth day after childbirth; during that span of time most women suffer, so to speak, even more than they did during their pregnancy; they often have unstoppable blood discharges;

during this time also, the newborns are all sick: no smile from them, for them not a moment free from danger. That is why also the last of these forty days **is a day of celebration, and this day it is called τεσσαρακοσταῖον.**¹¹¹

Censorinus thus reports that the feast of the fortieth day is a Greek custom. Therefore, it is probable that before the arrival of the Greeks in Egypt, the feast at the end of confinement was not called ‘of the forty days’ at all. The reason for this seems to be the difference between the length of confinement in Greece and the Near East, lasting between thirty and forty days, and confinement in Dynastic Egypt, which seems to have lasted only fourteen days.

It would be tempting and easy to say that the postpartum lasted only fourteen days in the Dynastic Period and then was extended to forty days in the Greco-Roman Period. However, as Egyptian birth practices were certainly influenced by Near Eastern culture from at least the 2nd millennium BC, I think it is more likely (albeit impossible to prove from the sources we currently have) that postpartum confinement lasted forty days in the Dynastic Period as well. The case of fourteen days for Ruddjedet’s purification may have been due to the exceptionality of that royal birth.¹¹²

5.4 Preliminary conclusions

In conclusion, the sources that I presented in this chapter show that the prolonged genital bleeding resulting from both menstruation and childbirth caused women in Greco-Roman Egypt to be regarded as temporarily impure. The most evident consequence of this was their exclusion from the religious activities at temples. At a domestic level this meant that women occupied certain parts of the house in order not to pollute the other members of the household. It is also likely that women tried not to contaminate the water used by the other members of the family by using their own jars filled with water to wash their hands and their body. Therefore, women were constantly experiencing a process of physical separation and reconciliation with deities, with their own family and with the community. The newborn child went through the same process because it was polluted by its own birth.

The sources that mention pollution deriving from menstruation, give us some hints as to the use of a special room in Greco-Roman Egypt. The sources that concern postpartum pollution in Greco-Roman Egypt however, do not explicitly mention where women spent their time of confinement within the house. Nevertheless, considering the similarity between the taboo of menstruation and postpartum, it could be argued that the way women used the domestic space during these special periods must have been similar. An analysis of papyrological and archaeological sources in Chapter 6 will help us understand how women inhabited the house, and whether there was a possible gender division of domestic space.

Notes

- 1 Hp. *Morb. Sacr.* 6.364, ed. Littré. Cf. Lupu 2005: 207.
- 2 Douglas 1966: 6–29.
- 3 Nihan 2013: 327, in Frevel and Nihan 2013.
- 4 Roberston 2013: 197–202 in Frevel and Nihan 2013.
- 5 Lupu 2005: 207.
- 6 Nihan 2013: 342–344, table 2.
- 7 Hutter 2013: 159–174, in Frevel and Nihan 2013.
- 8 In the magical papyrus P. *Leiden* I 348 the adjective *w^cb* can be found associated with the adjective *m³c*. P. *Leiden* I 348, Vso. 6,1–9,6. The Wörterbuch translates *m³c w^cb* as ‘geopfert und rein sein’ (in English: ‘to be sacrificed and pure/clean’). Wb 1, 281.25; 2, 22.7.
- 9 Wb. I, 453.7–454.7. Demotic: *hn*, CDD x: 103.
- 10 Quack indicated another two terms with a similar meaning: *sšb.w* meaning ‘damnation’ and *b.w* meaning ‘impurity’ or ‘infection’. Quack in Frevel and Nihan 2013: 138.
- 11 Leviticus 15:19, 24; 18:19; 20:18.
- 12 Mishnah, *Niddah*, 66a and 67b.
- 13 Zangenberg 2013: 537–572, in Frevel and Nihan 2013.
- 14 Philo Alex., *Spec. Leg.* III, 63.
- 15 Philo Alex., *Fug.* 153.
- 16 Leonhardt-Balzer 2001: 272.
- 17 Wb 3, 163.8.
- 18 Wilfong 1999: 431.
- 19 Frandsen 2007: 88–89.
- 20 The Sixteenth Upper Egyptian nome, the Seventeenth Upper Egyptian nome and the Tenth Lower Egyptian nome. The Tanis Geographical Papyrus lists practices from various nomes, and in one line the interdiction for all the gods is mentioned. Fr. 12 and 14 (Griffith and Petrie 1889: pl. 10) list the cases of the Cynopolite and the Athribite nomes: the interdiction for both these is the ‘menstruating woman’ (*hsmnt*), together with the ‘heart of the black bull’. Frandsen 2007: 88.
- 21 *bwtꜣf tpy hsmnt*. P. *Jumillac* in Vandier 1962: pl. XIV, 19. Frandsen 2007: 89.
- 22 Egyptian temples could not be accessed everywhere by common people, only by priests and priestesses. Most people could only stay in the forecourt on occasions of special festivals. As an alternative they could ‘talk’ to the god in external chapels called ‘chapels of the Hearing Ear’ or they could take part in processions outside the temple. Teeter 2011: 77–84.
- 23 SEG XXVIII 421 (Arcadia, Megalopolis Sanctuary regulation dated to c. 200 BC). Tr. by Te Riele 1978: 325–331. Cf. Lupu 2005: 206.
- 24 Te Riele 1978: 329–330. Lupu 2005: 210, lines 8–9.
- 25 Colin 2001: 268.
- 26 SEG XLII 1131; Pomeroy 1984: 136–137. Bingen 1993: 219–228; Rowlandson 1998: 65.
- 27 Rowlandson 1998: 65.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Lupu 2005: 210. For instance, seven days also appears in LSS 119.13 (καταμήνια) and IG II2 1365.20 and, in a more elaborate form, in the parallel LSCG 55.5 (γυνακεῖα) which, like LSS 119.13, also requires a wash. Nine days are prescribed in LSS 54.7–8.
- 30 Setne I: P. *Dem. Cairo* 30646, p. 3, lines 5–7. *Hpr pꜣ.y ssw n ir hsmn bnpw.i ir hsmn cⁿ*.
- 31 P. *Carlsberg* VIII verso, col. I xx+4–x+6. Iversen 1939: 1–31. See also the similar P. *Kahun*, 3,17–19, case 28 in Westendorff 1999: 434, n. 768.

- 32 Hp. *Steril.* 114, Littré VIII, 416.
- 33 For instance Hp. *Mul.* 1–9. On menstruation according to the Hippocratic Treatises and Aristotle, see Dean Jones 1989: 177–191.
- 34 King 1998: 216. Childbirth: Hp. *Mul.* 1.2, Littré VIII, 14–22. Intercourse: Hp. *Mul.* 1.1, Littré VIII, 10–14.
- 35 Cf. LSJ, τὰ ὑστερικά/ὑστερικός, suffering of the womb. Hp. *Prorrh.* 1.119. Hp. *Aph.* 5.35. In Roman medical writers, it is called ὑστερικὴ πνίξ or *passio hysterica*. Sor. 2.26; Gal. 11.47; 14.181. Aubert 1989: 423, notes 1–2. King 1998: 205–246. On p. 245 she explains how the meaning of this pathology changed from the Hippocratic treatises to the Roman medical writers: ‘In the Hippocratic corpus, neither the diagnosis of *hysterikê pnix* nor that of hysteria is made. The womb moves, causing a range of symptoms according to its eventual destination . . . a disease category of “suffocation of the womb” was created by the merger of a number of discrete Hippocratic texts giving symptoms, causes and therapies. Galen challenges the label, but keeps the concept and develops a different explanation based not on womb movement but on retained blood and seed.’
- 36 See *infra* for the Egyptian double meaning of menstruation and natron.
- 37 King 1998: 76 and 90. Arist. *GA* 775b, 11–14. The nurturing blood for the child (λόχια) had to leave the woman’s body only at the end of the pregnancy, otherwise the foetus suffered. Hp. *Aph.* 5.60.
- 38 P. *Ebers* 808: 95, 1–95, 3. Nunn 2002: 197.
- 39 In P. *Warren* 21 (Egypt, 244 AD); *PGM* XLII 76–106. Betz 1986: 294.
- 40 Tr. by John Scarborough in Betz 1986: 294.
- 41 1989: 429ff.
- 42 Col. *Rust.* 10.357–362. Cf. Aubert 1989: 431.
- 43 Col. *Rust.* 10.360. The Greek source is Democritus of Abdera, *On Anthipathies*.
- 44 45 Pl, *HN*, 28.44.
- 46 Pl, *HN*, 28.82–36.
- 47 Pl, *HN*, 28.85.
- 48 Pl, *HN*, 28.77.
- 49 *ddzfw m d3iw st-hmt wnnt m hsmnꜥs*. Frandsen 2007: 100.
- 50 Damascius, *Vitae Isidori reliquiae*, fr. 2. Rowlandson 1998: 75 note 1.
- 51 Guichard and Marti 2013: 85 in Frevel and Nihan 2013.
- 52 Charpin 2011: 259.
- 53 Wilfong 1999: 419–434.
- 54 Menstruating women in Deir el-Medina also appear in the ostrakon British Museum 5634 (=HO 83–84 O. BM 5634), which is a list of absences by Deir el-Medina workers in year 40 of Ramesses II (around 1250 BC). The list features the names of the absent individuals and the cause. In nine cases, the absence is due to the *hsmn* of a wife or a daughter of the workmen. Maybe the women could not carry on the normal domestic work, and their husbands or fathers stayed at home to help and look after them. Cf. Wilfong 1999: 427, table 40.1.O. Janssen (1980: 127–152) interpreted the *hsmn* as a *postpartum* confinement.
- 55 P. *Louvre* 2424. Transcription by Frandsen 2007: 83. I put in bold the parts meaning ‘your wives will perform the purifications (or will spend the time of menstruation) in the room (called) *hrhr.t*’.
- 56 Revillout and Brugsch 1880: 5 and pl. 2.
- 57 Papyrus *Louvre* 2424, line 2. Transliteration from Zauzich 1968: Urkunde 11, 17 ff. quoted in Frandsen 2007: 10. Please note that the spelling s.Hm.t.w instead of s.Hm.wt is from Frandsen 2007.
- 58 My translation is based on Zauzich: “Und du sollst hinausgehen aus der mittleren Tür des obigen Hauses. Du sollst hinaufgehen auf der Treppe des obigen Hauses auf [deine] obigen Räume. Du sollst die Vorhalle des obigen Hauses entsprechend der

- Hälfte bewohnen. **Deine Frauen sollen Reinigung machen (=menstruieren?) in dem Frauenraum** entsprechend der Hälfte. Du sollst arbeiten . . .”. Zauzich 1968: Urkunde 11, 17 ff.
- 59 The part of the contract describing the house is similar to the previous one, but this time Patmas says to his wife ‘you must do your purification for menstruation . . .’ and the room is called *hljl.t* and not *hrhr.t*.
- 60 P. *Louvre* 2443, line 4. Transliteration from Zauzich 1968: Urkunde 14, 21 ff. in Frandsen 2007: 10. See also Revillout and Brugsch 1880: 6–7 and pl. 3.
- 61 My translation based on Zauzich: “Und du sollst hinausgehen aus der mittleren Tür des obigen Hauses. Du sollst hinaufgehen auf der Treppe des obigen Hauses auf [deine] obigen Räume. Du sollst die Vorhalle des obigen Hauses entsprechend der Hälfte bewohnen. Du sollst Reinigung machen (=menstruieren?) in dem Frauenraum des obigen Hauses entsprechend der Hälfte. Du sollst arbeiten . . .”. Zauzich 1968: Urkunde 14, 21 ff.
- 62 P. *Louvre* 2424, 2.
- 63 P. *Louvre* 2443, 4.
- 64 P. *Strassb. Dem.* 1. Spiegelberg 1902: 18–20, transl. Glanville 1939: xxvii–xxxvi.
- 65 Muhs 2015: 330.
- 66 P. *Strassb. Dem.* 1, line 1; P. *Louvre* 2431, 4. Cf. *hrr(.t)* its variations in *CDD h*: 70–71.
- 67 Tr. by Glanville 1939: xxvii–xxxvi.
- 68 *hrr(.t)* in *CDD h*: 70–71.
- 69 In particular, P. *Louvre* 2431, 4, which uses exactly the term *hrr(.t)*.
- 70 More precisely, by scribes on behalf of Egyptian families.
- 71 Maybe they chose Egyptian law because it was more accessible (and maybe more advantageous) in Upper Egypt.
- 72 Strassmann 1996: 304–315.
- 73 Wasserfall 1999: 169–170.
- 74 Strassmann 1996: 306.
- 75 Wilfong 1999: 419–434.
- 76 P. *Westcar* 10.11–12. In the birth scenes of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri and Amenhotep III at Luxor, the children are bathed before they are presented to the other deities and enthroned. Breasted 1906: 88, nn. 216–217.
- 77 Private communication with Dr Ahmed Mekawi. Cf. El Guindi 1984.
- 78 P. *Westcar* 11.18–19.
- 79 80 LSJ, Menstruation: καθάρσεις, Hp. *Aph.* 5.60; καθάρσεις καταμηνίων Arist. *HA* 572b29; κάθαρσις alone, Arist. *GA* 775b5. Discharge after childbirth: κάθαρσις μετὰ τόκον, Hp. *Aër.* 7; ἡ ἐν τοῖς τόκοις κάθαρσις, Arist. *HA* 574b4.
- 81 Frandsen 2007: 86.
- 82 Guichard and Marti 2013: 85 in Frevel and Nihan 2013; Stol 2000: 205–206.
- 83 Stol 2000: 205.
- 84 Farber 1990: 315, lines 6–8.
- 85 Stol 2000: 206.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Leviticus 12.2. Quoted by Stol 2000: 205.
- 88 Cole 2004: 104.
- 89 *LSAM* 51. Commented by Cole 2004: 104 note 75.
- 90 *LSS* 91, 3rd century AD. Cole 2004: 104 note 74.
- 91 See Parker 1983.
- 92 *LSS* 91.15.
- 93 *LSAM* 12.7. Cf. *LSS* 54.5.
- 94 Cole 2004.
- 95 *LSS* 115A.16 – 20, tr. by Parker 1983: 336. Cf. Cole 2004: 106 note 84. For the contagion, E. *IT* 381–384; Porph. *Abst.* 4.16.

- 96 E. *El.* 653–654.
- 97 Tr. by E. P. Coleridge in Oates and O’Neill 1938.
- 98 E. *El.* 1107–1108.
- 99 Tr. by E. P. Coleridge in Oates and O’Neill 1938.
- 100 Cole 2004: note 85. Hsch. s.v. *stephanon ekpherein*. Cf. schol. Theoc. 2.11; Ephipp. in Ath. 9.370c; and Phot. s.v. *rhamnos*.
- 101 *SEG* XLII 1131 (Ptolemais Hermiou [Upper Egypt] 1st century BC). Bingen (1993: 219–228) provides a description of the column while a comment and English translation of the inscription is in Rowlandson 1998: 65.
- 102 Tr. by Rowlandson 1998: 65.
- 103 Pomeroy 1984: 136–137.
- 104 Colin 2001.
- 105 Esna V: 340–349; Leitz 2006: 77–81. Quack in Frevel and Nihan 2013: 120 and note 19.
- 106 Tr. by Lichtheim 2006: 126–136; Cf. Jasnow and Zauzich 2005; Quack 2013: 150–151, in Frevel and Nihan 2013.
- 107 P. *Fay.* 113 (Euhemeria, AD 100). Cf. Olsson 1925: 162–164.
- 108 My translation. Gemella is one of the five children of Gemellus, so the little boy mentioned in this papyrus is Gemellus’ grandson. Legras 2010: section 4.
- 109 Censorinus, *De Die Natali*, 11.7.
- 110 Hultsch 1867: 20.
- 111 My translation.
- 112 Her giving birth was exceptional because she was expecting three boys who would become Pharaohs of Egypt. For more details about Ruddjedet’s childbirth, see the discussion of the Westcar Papyrus in Chapter 2.1.

6 Childbirth, menstruation and domestic space in Greco-Roman Egypt

6.1 Housing in Greco-Roman Egypt: the sources

This chapter focuses on women's use of domestic space, during the phases of menstruation and childbirth. Since this book is concerned with the lives of non-elite women in Greco-Roman Egypt,¹ non-elite houses in towns and cities will be examined, and occasionally, for comparison, the urban architecture of Alexandria, the royal palaces and the villas of the provincial elite will be discussed. The humblest Greco-Roman mud dwellings are the most interesting for this study because their typology is simple and long-lasting, thus providing a good comparison with the earlier house typologies of the Dynastic Period, and with the later medieval and modern typologies of Egyptian and Near Eastern houses. Some of the most detailed archaeological case-studies I will present in this chapter come from Bakchias, a Greco-Roman Egyptian village in the Fayyum.

The earliest studies of Greco-Roman Egyptian houses come from the 19th century, when they were published and drawn for the first time in extensive archaeological reports.²

The first accurate studies of house plans were made in the first three decades of the 20th century by Boak and Peterson from the University of Michigan, at the sites of Karanis³ and Soknopaiou Nesos.⁴ However, until the second half of the 20th century, excavators rarely documented and published their results in a scientific manner. At the same time, the archaeological record was seriously damaged by illicit digging and, in the Fayyum, by the extraction of *sebakh* (an organic deposit used by local farmers as fertilizer) to obtain saltpetre.⁵

Luckhard was the first scholar to undertake a detailed study of houses in Greco-Roman Egypt.⁶ In 1969, Nowicka built on the work of Luckhard and published her study on private architecture in the Ptolemaic Period, based on archaeological reports combined with the papyrological evidence.⁷ In 1983, the work of Luckhard and Nowicka was updated and enriched by Maehler⁸ and Husson.⁹

Until the 1980s, papyrologists were the only scholars who wrote about the use of domestic space in Greco-Roman Egypt. Archaeologists who excavated in Egypt traditionally focused on tombs and temples rather than domestic structures. However, in the 1980s, the goals of archaeologists studying houses began to change. Archaeologists excavating the NK workmen's villages of Amarna and Deir

el-Medina found a large number of artefacts in well preserved domestic contexts, and began to consider how the archaeological evidence could be used as a valid source to write a social history.¹⁰ The studies and reports from these excavations at Amarna¹¹ and Deir el-Medina¹² contain detailed analyses of the artefact assemblages found within domestic contexts. The results from these two projects provoked scholarly interest in everyday life in Ancient Egyptian houses, such as social relations between the inhabitants and the gendered division of domestic space.

More extensive work on this topic began to take place in ancient Greek studies though. From the 1980s, the archaeologists who studied ancient Greek houses began using archaeological evidence as a source to study ancient Greek society.¹³ Archaeological evidence is important for the study of housing in Greece because the only written sources concerning housing in ancient Greece are literary, and they only incidentally mention the use of rooms.¹⁴ Walker was a pioneer here by using the archaeological evidence to study women's use of domestic space in Greek households.¹⁵ In the following years, Nevett continued her interdisciplinary study of the Greek household using archaeological evidence and literary sources. She investigated the division between public and private spaces and between female and male spaces, although soon realised that these questions were difficult to answer without a comparison with the evidence from archaeological sites outside Greece.

In Greco-Roman Egypt, the preservation of thousands of papyri allows for a more specific study of households. Surprisingly, for a long time, the information from papyri was not compared to the archaeological evidence.¹⁶ In the past decade, such an approach only tends to appear in final archaeological reports, published at the end of an excavation; preliminary ones take a less interpretative approach using the papyri. At the same time, cooperation between archaeology and papyrology has become even more difficult because archaeological studies of Greco-Roman Egyptian housing are becoming much more complex, incorporating goals and methods from new disciplines as well.

For instance, the digital reconstruction of houses is very popular and impressive,¹⁷ even if it always poses the risk of giving more importance to the quality of the reconstruction than to the real archaeological data available: reconstructing a house from the ground to the roof when only the foundations survive, might mean filling the gaps with inaccurate information.

Another scientific tool, borrowed from architecture, and increasingly used by archaeologists studying Greek and Roman urban and domestic space, is Space Syntax theory. This theory was adopted by archaeologists to interpret domestic space in social terms.¹⁸ The goal of Space Syntax theory is similar to that of this chapter: understanding social behaviours through the study of the archaeological evidence. This approach has given us new interesting results in the study of urban and domestic space, especially for Pompeii¹⁹ and Ostia.²⁰ However, I will not apply these methods here to the study of rooms in Greco-Roman Egyptian houses because, unlike in Pompeii and Ostia, for Egypt we have a rich source of information for domestic space from the papyri that allows us to make fruitful comparisons with the archaeological evidence.

Another approach recently applied to Ancient Egyptian domestic archaeology is to compare it with modern Egyptian housing, notably with contemporary Egyptian mudbrick architecture which it is very traditional.²¹

Modern Egyptian architecture can offer valuable comparative data for the study of houses in Greco-Roman Egypt. However, it is important to consider the risks deriving from this comparison, as contemporary Egyptian architecture is the result of centuries of varying cultural influences. Building materials such as mud brick have remained the same since ancient times, but some architectural features might have changed. An example of this change is tower-houses, frequently built in Greco-Roman Egypt but no longer existing in the modern country. The foundations of ancient tower-houses have a square or rectangular plan of small dimensions. If we had to reconstruct the superstructure of an ancient tower by comparing its plan with a modern Egyptian house, we would choose to interpret it as a house of small dimensions rather than a tower because there are no tower-houses today. Images of ancient Nilotic landscapes and terracotta models of towers reveal that the tower had a small plan not because it was a small house but because it developed vertically, rather than horizontally. In this way, in the case of ancient tower-houses, a comparison with modern houses in Egypt would have been misleading. However, other countries outside Egypt, like Yemen, have maintained the tradition of building tower-houses until modern times, and so we do have the possibility of a comparison between ancient and modern towers, at least.²²

Two important conferences on ancient housing and society were held in 2013, which demonstrate the growth in popularity of this topic in the past few years.²³ However, in them, not many scholars talked about Greco-Roman Egyptian houses. Greco-Roman houses in Egypt are ignored in favour of the more popular Dynastic Egyptian architecture.²⁴

Before beginning any discussion of women and domestic space, we need to lay out the nature of the evidence for non-elite domestic houses in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt and its problems and advantages. These sources are:

- archaeological evidence (6.1.1);
- Hellenistic and Roman terracotta models of houses coming from Egypt (6.1.2);
- Greek and Demotic papyri and ostraca, which describe the functions of buildings and rooms (6.1.3);
- Nilotic paintings, mosaics and reliefs coming from Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Praeneste (6.1.4).

6.1.1 Sources: the archaeological evidence

The archaeological evidence is the most important source for the study of house plans. The amount of evidence available to study is increasing every year, thanks to the reports coming from many on-going excavations. However, not many archaeological sites give useful information for the study of housing: indeed,

houses are often not preserved beyond the level of foundations, so the interpretation of their house plans is not possible. Furthermore, the perishable nature of building materials like wood and mudbricks has created gaps in the archaeological record of urban sites.

As mentioned above, another limitation of the study of archaeological evidence is the modest number of comparative studies for housing in Greco-Roman Egypt. Reports tend to focus on the house plans for their site, without comparing them with house plans from other Egyptian sites.

The most consistent elements found in Greco-Roman Egyptian houses are the building materials and construction techniques. The shapes of doors, windows and shutters were the result of cultural choices, while the materials used depended on more objective environmental and architectural factors, like climate, stability of the house and the local availability of materials. In addition, non-elite houses were not built by architects but by common people who probably based their choice of house plan on contingent factors: the size of the house depended on the land owned by the family (or by an individual); the division of the house depended on family composition and family needs; and the techniques depended on the skills of the builder. It is also likely that many houses were built in the same way for many decades following family traditions.²⁵

The most widely used material for houses was mudbrick,²⁶ and for more modest houses walls adobe was used. Mud walls are less resistant than mudbrick walls, but are much cheaper and easier to build: this is the reason why adobe houses never disappeared from Egypt, and are still found in modern Egyptian villages. Baked bricks were not used for private houses in Egypt until the Roman Period and, even then, they were rare.²⁷ Reed, the second most commonly used material after mud, was used to build rural huts, pavilions with different functions, and ceilings of flat-roofed houses. Wood was mainly imported,²⁸ and in modest homes was used for doors, window frames, shutters, wooden beams, lintels and architraves. Wooden fittings were so expensive that they were removed when a family moved to a new home. Stone was rarely used for walls, but could sometimes be a component of the foundations,²⁹ even though most houses built in mud brick had foundations made of the same material.

Interior walls were coated in different ways; in modest houses they were covered with a thick layer of grey-brown plaster made of silt mixed with chopped straw. In richer houses the plaster was prepared with greater care, especially when used as a background for paintings.³⁰

The ceilings of rooms and the roof of houses could be vaulted or flat.³¹ Flat ceilings were used especially for single-storey houses, with a flat terraced roof which was used as a domestic space. Awnings and kiosks were built over the flat roof terrace. Vaulted ceilings, normally built in brick, were particularly resistant, and so covered cellars and the lower floors of multi-storey houses.³²

The floors of non-elite houses were often made of a layer of beaten clay, mixed with straw or mudbricks, while richer houses could have a stone pavement.³³ In houses inhabited for decades, the level of the floor was raised by the dust carried by the wind through the windows and by the rubbish accumulated in the

courtyards. Once a floor or an entire room was blocked by sand, the room was abandoned and covered by a new pavement. Windows were not always present in houses because many of them received light and air from an internal courtyard. When windows were present, they were quite small, and those in the front façade of the house were built well above the street level in order to prevent heat and sand from entering. Some windows had a grill of vertical wooden bars,³⁴ others were covered by a cloth.³⁵

Doors could be of many different types. The typical Egyptian shape was a rectangular door which narrowed towards the top. However, entrance doors could also be arched in more modest houses. Casings of doors were made in stone or in wood. Entrance doors were carefully positioned in order to guarantee ventilation and light without letting in dust. Inside the house there were internal doors which connected different rooms. Both external and internal doors could be closed by a lock.³⁶ In modern mudbrick houses, the rooms with a lock in the ground floor are used in winter to separate the animals from the living areas.³⁷

A very common feature, especially in the Fayyum, were underground cellars, called *καμάρα* or *κατάγαιον* in Greek papyri.³⁸ Cellars were certainly used for the storage of food, and are never mentioned as a place to live, even if they must have been the coolest area in the house, alongside the airy roof. However, the cellars had to be illuminated with lamps as they often had no windows, with a few exceptions. In Karanis,³⁹ for example, there are some cellars with windows, such as room F in house C42,⁴⁰ but it is very likely that these were in fact ground floor rooms used as cellars, when the underground cellars were abandoned because they had filled up with debris and sand. Another case in Karanis is house C50/51,⁴¹ whose staircase is made of stone and leads to an underground room provided with windows. Most of the cellars were accessed from the ground floor through wooden trap doors via a vertical wooden stepladder, or through inserting one's feet in a few holes in the wall.

The plans of non-elite houses in Greco-Roman Egypt did not alter much from the Dynastic to the Roman Period, even though, from the Ptolemaic Period, both towns and rural areas drastically changed. Some villages, towns and cities were founded for the first time or re-founded by the Ptolemies. The area that was the most transformed was the Fayyum region. This region was a very fertile island in the middle of the desert, and a popular place for hunting and fishing during the Pharaonic Period. MK Pharaohs, and in particular Amenemhat II, built irrigation canals, which brought the water of the Nile to the Fayyum, extending the cultivable and habitable areas in the area. After the decline of the MK Pharaohs, many parts of the Fayyum returned to desert due to the lack of maintenance of the canals. The MK towns of the Fayyum, like Soknopaiou Nesos, were re-founded by the Ptolemies, who also founded new towns in the region.⁴² In villages like Bakchias, the pre-Ptolemaic phase is attested by scattered finds and inscriptions, but the most ancient domestic archaeological levels are dated to the Ptolemaic Period.⁴³

6.1.1.1 *Urban houses*

Urban houses were built very close to each other, as seen in the archaeology and something also apparent from the papyri. Contracts show how a house could be surrounded by other houses on most sides⁴⁴ or could be separated by narrow lanes.⁴⁵ The most modest houses⁴⁶ included a few rooms and two floors with an internal ramp of stairs leading to the upper floor and the flat roof.⁴⁷ Houses with just one storey were more frequent in semi-rural villages or small towns.⁴⁸ These modest urban houses did not have a courtyard, but they could share a common courtyard with other houses.⁴⁹ The bigger urban houses had one or more courtyards; when there was one courtyard, it was normally located in the middle of the house. The courtyard provided light and air to the house, and was used for cooking and household activities; for houses with more than one courtyard, it is likely that the courtyards had different functions. Husson shows that αἶθριον and αὐλή are the two Greek terms used for ‘courtyard’ in the papyri.⁵⁰ The αὐλή seems to have been less private than the αἶθριον: in fact, the αὐλή is often defined as ‘adjacent’ (προσοῦσα),⁵¹ showing that it was placed on a side of the house and not at the centre of it. Those outside the family could also rent the αὐλή of a house, while the αἶθριον was never rented separately to people not living there. In addition, the term αὐλή did not necessarily indicate a courtyard of a house; it could also mean the courtyard in non-residential buildings.⁵² The αἶθριον was in a central position in the house; it never appears as being rented to someone else and was unequivocally a domestic courtyard.⁵³ Therefore, the αἶθριον was the private courtyard of the house which gave access to the private rooms, while the αὐλή was likely used for household activities and to keep the animals.

Most of the houses from urban blocks had a regular square plan, but there were also L-shaped houses and houses with an irregular plan adapted to the surrounding buildings.⁵⁴ Davoli claims that the L-shaped buildings were public buildings. However, the L-shaped buildings found in the archaeological record might be identified with the ‘gamma buildings’ described in the papyri; at least one ‘gamma building’ was used as a private house according to a papyrus from Karanis.⁵⁵ In addition, some modern tower-houses in Yemen have the same L-shaped plan,⁵⁶ showing that perhaps L-shaped foundations belonged to residential tower-houses.

Towers are attested at several Greco-Roman Egyptian urban and rural sites in the papyri and by terracotta models.⁵⁷ It has been argued that the first towers appeared in Egypt in the Twelfth Dynasty, but the only evidence for this was a model tower from El-Bersheh, which has survived in a sketch.⁵⁸ A model of a crenellated tower dating to the 18th Dynasty was found at Haraga,⁵⁹ at the entrance to the Fayum oasis (Figure 6.1). The presence on it of the god Ptah and of a woman praying in front of two ‘hearing ears’ suggests that this tower model was used as a cultic medium to receive the prayers directed to Ptah. However, it is also likely that it was a model of a real-life building like the ones attested in the Greco-Roman Period.

The terracotta models suggest that tower-houses were built from the MK or at least from the NK. However, no Dynastic tower-houses have been identified so

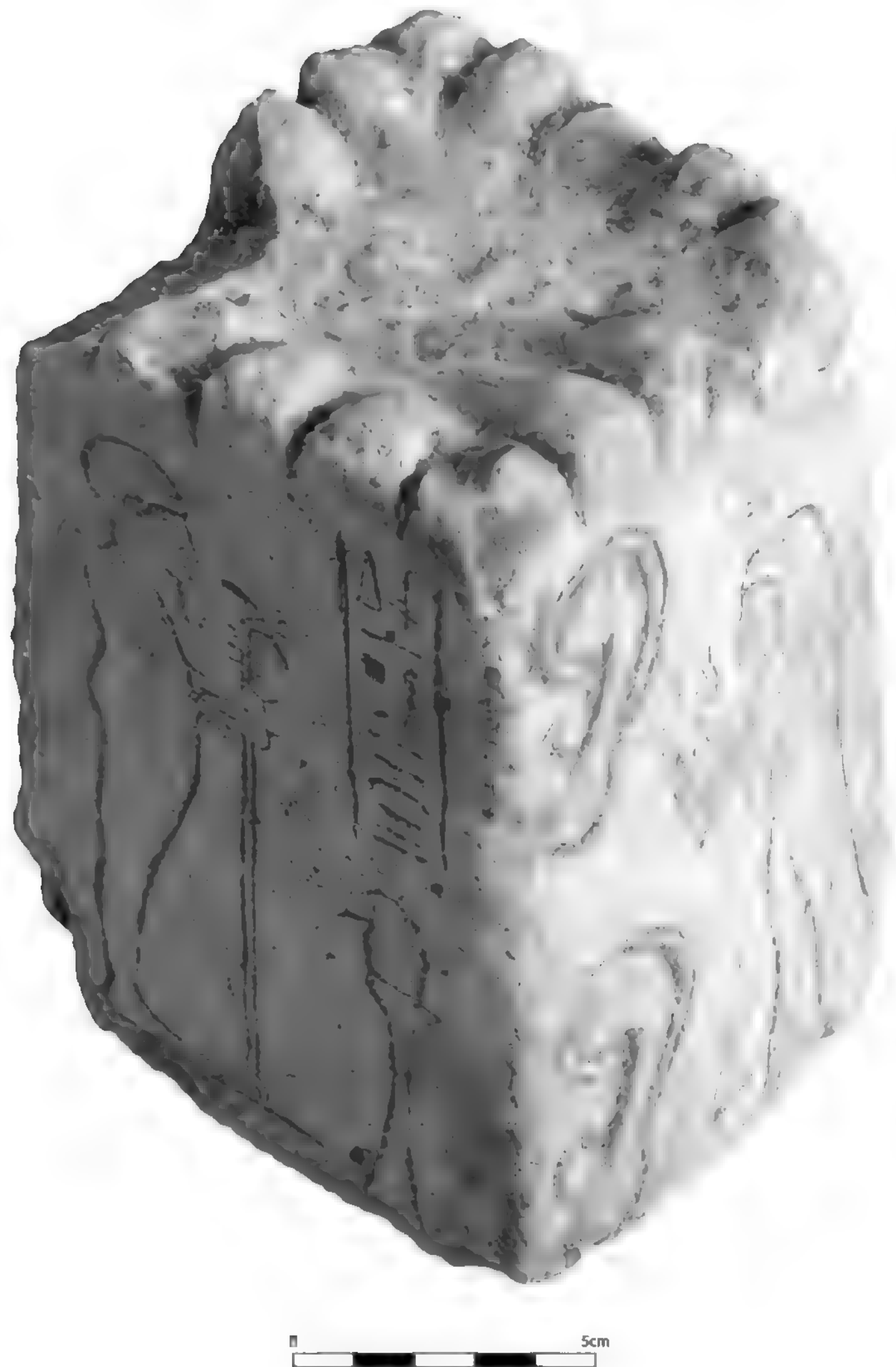


Figure 6.1 Terracotta model of crenellated tower decorated with the image of the god Ptah and of a woman praying in front of two 'hearing ears'. New Kingdom (18th Dynasty). From Haraga, Fayyum, Egypt.

far by archaeologists, except for the ones built in temples;⁶⁰ the earliest towers appear in the Delta dating to the Saite Period,⁶¹ becoming more widespread in the Ptolemaic era. Interestingly, this kind of building was adopted in all types of settlement, from the countryside to the capital of the Ptolemaic kingdom, Alexandria.⁶² In urban centres, the tower could have been a residential building (πύργος) with storage areas and stables downstairs, but also may have been a defensive tower or guarding point (μαγδῶλ).⁶³

Papyri give these residential and defensive towers different names, while the archaeological evidence of towers does not always allow a clear distinction between the πύργος and the μαγδῶλ. For instance, the only building interpreted as tower in Bakchias was believed to be a defensive tower because no artefacts, fittings or wall decorations were found, that would suggest residential use.⁶⁴ It is equally possible though that the tower was indeed a πύργος, as it could have been abandoned in ancient times with its inhabitants taking with them all the furniture and wooden fittings.

Papyri demonstrate that some buildings could be accessed by two entrance towers in houses ‘with two towers’ (οἰκία διπυργία).⁶⁵ This suggests that the towers could be used either as an independent residential building or the entrance for the house.⁶⁶ Some papyri, although not the archaeological evidence, report that some houses had a monumental entrance called a πυλῶν, a term normally used for the monumental entrance of Egyptian temples.⁶⁷

6.1.1.2 Rural houses

The countryside changed in the Ptolemaic Period due to the assignment of *kleroi* to soldiers; it was also chosen as a place for a second home by many rich people who lived in the big cities, especially those from the capital Alexandria. Rich landowners had large provincial villas, while the middle classes had more modest houses, albeit still with several storeys and with areas for storage divided from residential areas. Ordinary farmers lived in small houses assigned by the landowner, or in huts made of straw and reeds.⁶⁸

The rural Egyptian landscape must have included many different kinds of structures. Modest structures consisted of circular huts of reeds, or small square houses made of reeds caulked by clay. Larger houses had a flat roof, and sometimes a light construction on the top of the roof, in the form of a light, airy awning. There were also house complexes surrounded by a precinct:⁶⁹ the complex often included one or two towers built adjacent to the house, either in the front or on its side. The shape of rural towers resembled those of urban towers; they inclined towards the top and were covered by a flat roof with a crenellated terrace (Figures 6.1, 6.5). The entrance to the tower was raised from the street level and was accessed via some steps.⁷⁰ The precincts of rural houses included other structures as well: water cisterns made of brick, storage buildings, dovecotes, and private gardens surrounded by a wall.⁷¹

6.1.2 Sources: terracotta models

Hellenistic and Roman terracotta lamps representing houses are a valuable source of information for us because they show the upper floors of urban and countryside dwellings, something rarely preserved for multi-storey houses, and never preserved for towers. Nowicka divides such lamps into three groups:⁷²

- Lamps in the form of small huts (rounded or rectangular), with a large frontal hole for the door.
- Lamps in the form of towers with a flat or conical roof; the conical shape was probably due to its use as a handle.
- Models of houses on a square plan, with a terraced flat roof, more often with just one floor and with windows. A sort of superstructure in the shape of a small pavilion appears on the flat roof of certain monuments.

6.1.3 *Sources: papyri*

Papyri are very important sources for the study of Greco-Roman Egyptian houses, but sometimes they raise more questions than answers: the ambiguity of papyri in defining domestic spaces makes them difficult to reconcile with the equally fragmentary archaeological evidence. An example of these problems can be seen in the papyrologist van Minnen's attempt to describe the life of a particular family in a house of Karanis (B17) based on the papyri found in it.⁷³ It is likely that the family mentioned in the papyri did indeed live in that house at some point because the archaeological context in which these papyri were found was sealed. However, knowing a certain family lived in a certain house at some point in time does not describe the entire history of the house, only a short phase of it. Van Minnen also tried to detect the traces of women in the house through the study of the artefact assemblages found within it, but these objects could not be studied in their original context because only the foundations of B17 survived.

The information we obtain from the papyri is also difficult to confirm through the archaeological evidence. For instance, we can read in wills and sale contracts that houses were often subdivided among relatives and non-relatives, but this cannot be confirmed from excavated houses, leaving another important gap between words and walls. The only exception to this is the evidence for the internal subdivision of houses into smaller units, which sometimes occurred when the house was inherited by several heirs. Internal subdivisions are often attested in papyri, and can be seen very occasionally in the archaeology: in Karanis, house C75 was divided into two parts, the northern part kept the original entrance while the southern part had a new entrance tower built in front of it.⁷⁴

Importantly papyri can give us very precious information about the use of rooms and structures. Interpreting this kind of information is not without risk, however, as the words used in the papyri to define certain rooms or structures can vary according to the different chronological period, to the different geographical area, and probably even to the social class of the person writing the papyrus.⁷⁵ Yet, if we acknowledge these problems, what papyri suggest about the function of rooms and buildings can be usefully compared with the archaeological data. Papyri are especially helpful where the archaeological evidence is well preserved and offers us some chance for a more precise interpretation. For instance, if a building has a definable plan, it can be more easily identified with a similar plan described in the papyri. In the same way, inside the house, rooms which are interpreted as dining rooms thanks to the discovery of particular internal decorative scheme, can be compared more easily with spaces called 'dining rooms' in the papyri.

This part of the book is largely aimed at answering very specific questions about women and their reproductive processes in the domestic environment, but hopefully it will also show that it is possible to make a careful interdisciplinary study of Greco-Roman Egyptian housing, without misusing any of the available sources.

6.1.4 Sources: Nilotic paintings and mosaics

Another valuable but less reliable form of evidence are the Nilotic painted scenes coming from houses in Pompeii and Herculaneum. They have been utilised by various scholars,⁷⁶ although will not be greatly used here. These paintings are precious because they show perishable structures in the countryside which are no longer preserved. Similarly, a terracotta relief, preserved at Budapest,⁷⁷ and a famous mosaic known as the Barberini of Praeneste,⁷⁸ show ancient residential and storage buildings scattered around the Egyptian countryside.

Unfortunately, we cannot be sure whether these Roman painters and mosaic makers actually visited Egypt in person, or whether they simply copied these images from reliable models. It seems unlikely that the Nilotic scenes were a complete Roman invention though, as they were meant to show structures typical of the Egyptian landscape.

6.2 A discussion on a possible gendered division of the house in Greco-Roman Egypt

This section and the next will discuss specific social questions concerning women and housing in Greco-Roman Egypt. Houses have been described mainly in terms of materials, structures and house plans, but now I will focus on some internal rooms of the house, in order to find out which parts of it were occupied by women, and whether they were segregated or free to move anywhere. This discussion will allow me to discuss whether there were areas of the house used by women during menstruation and childbirth, in the context of beliefs concerning pollution caused by women's reproductive processes.⁷⁹

Papyri can reveal much about the way people inhabited their homes. Greek terms were applied to Egyptian structures, suggesting that the Greeks largely adapted their lives to local Egyptian architecture, but still preserved the memory of their own domestic spaces. Adaptation to Egyptian architecture was convenient for foreigners because the house plans and structures of Egyptian houses were ideal for the Egyptian environment. Their orientation was aimed at exploiting refreshing winds, their small windows and raised entrances protected homes from the heat, and central roof openings allowed houses to receive more light.

One of the best examples of Greek adaptation of Egyptian house design is the change of the position of the hearth. The hearth, or *hestia*,⁸⁰ was one of the most meaningful domestic spaces for the Greeks because it was the focus of the house.⁸¹ Some Egyptian houses had a hearth, but it was rarely central, and in many cases, the Greek *hestia* was replaced with the open-air Egyptian fire in the courtyard, more convenient in a much warmer climate. Despite the dislocation of the hearth in Egyptian houses, Greek papyri still preserved the memory of it as the ideal centre of the house, where marriages and important events took place.⁸² This suggests that, even though the Greeks soon adapted themselves to Egyptian architecture, any cultural adaptation alongside this was much slower.

As far as women were concerned, it is likely that the Greeks brought to Egypt their own way of dividing the areas of the house. According to Vitruvius, the private areas of the Greek house included an area called the *gynaikonitis*, where women could gather.⁸³ Vitruvius also mentions an area for male activities called the *andronitis*, where men could meet without their wives.⁸⁴ Vitruvius' description, and other sources I will discuss later, suggest that the Greek house was divided into female and male areas. Modern studies⁸⁵ on gender segregation and division show that a gendered division of the house not only depends on the position of women in their family, but also their position in society: therefore, a study of women's social status should always precede a study of housing.

Studies of modern societies show that in those completely controlled by men, gender segregation and gender division are acceptable ways to separate female and male areas within the house. Domestic segregation exists today in some part of the world, for instance, some Islamic populations⁸⁶ imposed and still impose total segregation on their women.⁸⁷ Gender *segregation* and *division* can be confused however, because in both cases women's domestic spaces are separated from men's. However, when there is a gendered differentiation of spaces, women live separately from men but, at the same time, they are free to leave the house. When women are 'segregated' they are not only limited within the domestic space but also outside it.

Most modern societies just divide public areas from more private ones, without having a real dichotomy between genders in their use of domestic space. Although in some societies, women dedicate more time to household activities than men, so they tend to spend more time at home.

Gender segregation for women in the Classical world and in ancient Egypt has been mainly discarded as something unlikely,⁸⁸ although the literary evidence from Greece and Rome, seems to attest it: Athenian women were kept at home, were not allowed to study and just spent the rest of their lives spinning wool, weaving and producing offspring.⁸⁹ Another very familiar trope is the image of the Roman Republican wife, waiting for her husband at home and later receiving his *osculum*, the kiss to check the wife's breath, making sure that she had not drunk any wine during his absence.⁹⁰ There is an element of truth in these literary sources: it is true that women in Greece, and especially in Athens, had social constraints and could not take part in politics. It is also true that there was a Roman Republican law which allowed men to check their wives' breath. However, the images of women presented by ancient literature were mainly ideals of patriarchal societies where the males of the family saw subordination of women as a way to control their sexual activity.⁹¹

Although the idea of gender segregation in Classical World and Egypt should be rejected, some scholars think that a gendered differentiation of domestic space existed.⁹² Some rooms of Ancient Egyptian houses from the village of Deir el-Medina show a prevalent female and male usage. However, none of the rooms was exclusively used by a single sex.⁹³ There is also scepticism about the possibility of attributing a function to each room because Dynastic sources rarely identified them, unlike Hellenistic and Roman papyri. For instance there is some evidence

that men and women shared the same bed,⁹⁴ but it cannot be demonstrated that in Dynastic Egypt spouses had a room exclusively used as a bedroom.⁹⁵

As such there is a scholarly consensus that there was no sharp gendered differentiation in the Ancient Egyptian house, and the division of rooms was only a reality for richer families.

As with these studies of NK Egypt, Nevett analysed the evidence for Classical Greek houses to find out whether there was any gender differentiation of domestic space. She had the advantage of having Greek literary sources which mention a division of domestic space between *andron* (men's areas) and *gynaikonitis* (women's areas). To serve as a contrast with Vitruvius' description of these areas, it is worth quoting here two Greek sources which mention this division.⁹⁶

In this excerpt from Xenophon's *Oikonomikos*, a man is showing his wife the rooms of the house:

*So the thalamos is in a secure place and calls for the most valuable blankets and equipment. Then I showed her the women's apartments, separated from the men's apartments by a bolted door, whereby nothing from within could be conveyed without clandestinely, nor children born and bred by our domestics without our knowledge and consent — no unimportant matter, since, if the act of rearing children tends to make good servants still more loyally disposed, cohabiting but sharpens ingenuity for mischief in the bad.*⁹⁷

This indicates that the bridal chamber (*thalamos*) was the most comfortable and protected area. Women's apartments (*gynaikonitis*) and men's apartments (*andronitis*) are mentioned, but they are clearly rooms for the servants rather than for the owners. In addition, the separation between female and male servants is a choice of the householder, in order to keep their sexual activity and reproduction under control.

In another source, Lysias, a man shows that his wife had, unusually, decided to sleep downstairs because she had to wash her newborn baby, and she did not want to risk or endanger herself or the baby by descending the stairs every time. He says that in order to allow his wife to stay downstairs with the baby, the rooms for men are kept upstairs and the rooms for women downstairs, remarking that this situation was exceptional.

*Now in the first place I must tell you, sirs (for I am obliged to give you these particulars), my dwelling is on two floors, the upper being equal in space to the lower, with the women's quarters above and the men's below. When the child was born to us, its mother suckled it; and in order that, each time that it had to be washed, she might avoid the risk of descending by the stairs, I used to live above, and the women below.*⁹⁸

Nevett also examined the house plans of Greek houses and reached a conclusion similar to Koltsida's for Egyptian archaeology: that is, it is difficult to give a room to room interpretation because most of the spaces must have been multifunctional,

and this function changed seasonally or even daily. After studying the domestic artefact assemblages, Nevett did not find any group of them which suggested women or men exclusively resided in certain rooms. However, she noticed a spatial distribution, in that the private parts were divided from the public ones through separate entrances and the use of a courtyard. She did not find any archaeological evidence of permanent gender differentiation in ancient Greek housing, and reached the conclusion that the division between the *gynaikon* and *andron* might have simply been a division between private and public spaces.⁹⁹

The archaeological evidence for Dynastic Egypt and ancient Greece is currently too scarce to provide a precise answer for the use of rooms by women, but it does suggest that there was no gender differentiation in houses, only a division between public and private space.

Looking for gender differentiations in Greco-Roman Egyptian houses seems to be easier on the surface because the archaeological evidence is better preserved and a large number of papyri describe the rooms of the house. However, house plans could vary according to a large number of factors, such as family composition, space available, and local temperatures, so it not possible to generate a standardised typology of rooms even here. A legal and structural subdivision of the house was common when the family composition of the household changed, but sometimes a rearrangement of the household did not modify the house structurally. As such, contracts on papyri¹⁰⁰ are better than archaeology in identifying these cases. When the house was unmodified, kin members had to share common spaces, like the stairs and the entrance room at the ground level. Other families chose to divide the property by raising new walls and creating new entrances. In Karanis, there are two houses, C54 and B118, which have been divided into two separate properties.¹⁰¹ C54 was divided into two parts, and the southern part received an entrance through a second staircase arranged in a tower structure. B118 had a double stairway as well.¹⁰²

Papyri describing house divisions also reveal something that could help us in discussing a possible gendered division of the house: a document exists that shows that a free woman could live with other people not necessarily related to her by kinship or marriage.¹⁰³ This may mean that women were not prevented by their male relatives from sharing a house with other non-kin males. However, more examples of this are needed in order to state this unequivocally.

Another element that suggests gender division did not exist in Greco-Roman Egypt is the lack of the use of the term *gynaikonitis*. In Greco-Roman Egypt it is no longer mentioned, with only the *andron* described in papyri from the 3rd century BC to the 6th century AD.¹⁰⁴ Husson explains that the *andron* was a reception area for guests which had a tripartite division (entrance, reception, residential area).¹⁰⁵ However, the existence of the *andron* in Egypt is infrequent, and seems to feature mainly in urban houses. The only rooms in the house that are sometimes assigned exclusively to women are bedrooms and storage rooms, often located on upper floors.¹⁰⁶

Bedrooms in Greco-Roman Egyptian papyri, dating from the 3rd century BC to 7th century AD, are generally called *koiton* or *koitonarion*.¹⁰⁷ Rooms used as

bedrooms are attested on the upper floors,¹⁰⁸ on the terrace,¹⁰⁹ on the ground floor,¹¹⁰ and in the towers.¹¹¹ Some sources also suggest that bedrooms were connected with adjacent semicircular rooms opened on one side, called *exedrae*. However, the *exedra* is also mentioned in other contexts, so it was not a space exclusively associated with bedrooms.¹¹²

Bedroom furniture would be an important element in locating the bedroom in a house, but unfortunately, to my knowledge, no Ptolemaic or Roman beds have been found in situ. This is probably due to the fact they were very expensive items of furniture, so when people abandoned their houses they took their beds with them. The legs of a fine bed may have been found in situ by Grenfell and Hunt, but their excavation was pre-stratigraphic, so we are only left with a very vague description of the discovery.¹¹³ Beds are mentioned in papyri where they were ordered for houses in villages and towns. More often though, people bought mattresses and pillows rather than beds which suggests that they either made their own beds or they slept on the ground.¹¹⁴

Interestingly some documents from Greco-Roman Egypt attribute bedrooms explicitly to women. The first example, from the 2nd century AD, describes the bedroom of Aline, wife of the strategos (head of the civil administration of the nome) Apollonios, who built for himself and his family a luxurious mansion in the countryside of Hermopolis.¹¹⁵ Aline's bedroom is mentioned in P. *Giss* 67, 15–16,¹¹⁶ and is located in the tower-house of the residential complex, while another bedroom, located by the αἶθριον, is mentioned in the same papyrus and in P. *Brem.* 15, 7. Aline's bedroom seems to be located on a different floor compared to the bedroom of the men of the house, and this could be an indication of gender differentiation, and the possible existence here of the *andron* and *gynaikonitis*.¹¹⁷ However, this was an atypically large mansion, so a special bedroom looks more like a privilege for Aline, rather than a way to isolate her.

A Byzantine papyrus from Herakleopolis, dated to the 6th century AD,¹¹⁸ could also indicate a room reserved for women, according to Husson.¹¹⁹ In this papyrus, a tenant leased a κοιτωνάριον (bedroom) on the second floor called a νυμφοταμίον. This word is a hapax, a literary modification of ταμεῖον, the private storeroom which was later called the κέλλα. According to Husson,¹²⁰ this ταμεῖον was called νυμφοταμίον because it could contain the objects and clothes which formed the dowry of a fiancée. Whatever the function of the bedroom, it seems to be closely related to the νύμφη, the woman who had come of age.

The term νυμφών, attributed to a room, also appears in a Roman papyrus which describes the arrangements before a wedding feast.¹²¹ As the name indicates a marriageable woman, and the letter concerns the preparation for a wedding, it is tempting to think that the νυμφών was the room for the unmarried or betrothed woman. However, the allusion to the νυμφών is not clear because the document unfortunately becomes fragmentary in the part mentioning this term.

Evidence for the use of specific bedrooms for unmarried women appears in the story of the Israelite patriarch Joseph and his Egyptian wife Aseneth, originally written in Greek in the Roman Period, possibly by a Christian author, and preserved in a 6th century AD manuscript in Syriac.¹²² The second chapter

is particularly interesting because it describes the house of the unmarried girl Aseneth in Egypt: from this description, it is possible to see how a young unmarried girl lived in Greco-Roman Egypt.

. . . Pentephres had a tower in his house, and it was large and very high. 2. And the top storey had ten rooms in it . . . The second room contained all the finery for Aseneth's adornment and treasure chests. [3] . . . 8. And all her girl-
ish ornaments were there. [4] 9. The third room contained all the good things
of the earth; [5] and it was Aseneth's store-house. 10. And seven virgins had
the remaining seven rooms, one each . . . 12. And Aseneth's large room,
where she spent her time, [6] had three windows . . . 14. And a golden bed
stood in the room, facing the east . . . 16. In this bed Aseneth used to sleep
alone, and no man or woman ever [7] sat upon it, except Aseneth only . . .¹²³

The house seems to be a typical luxurious countryside house surrounded by high walls with guards. Inside the walls the complex included one, or maybe more, towers, the main house, a beautiful orchard, and an internal irrigation system which kept the trees watered. Aseneth was the only member of her family who lived in the tower and it is explicitly said that this would protect her from the gaze of men. However, the girl was not completely alone in the upper floor of the tower as it had ten rooms in total, three for Aseneth and the remaining seven for seven young servants of her own age.

The description of Aseneth's treasures in the rooms in the tower is probably exaggerated, but it is worthy of note because, to the best my knowledge, it is the only known detailed description of an unmarried girl's bedroom in Greco-Roman Egypt. It is also unique in its description of an upper floor room in a tower-house. The details given for the tower itself are valuable independent of any specific study of women, as no upper floors survive; the terracotta models can only inform us of a tower's external appearance.

The bedroom had three windows, showing that the upper floor of *pyrgoi* had many. The main element of furniture described is the girl's bed, where she slept alone.

The second room contained Aseneth's girlish clothes, and could have had a similar function as to the *νυμφοταμῖον* in the the Byzantine house mentioned in *SB* VI 9153: a room with all the precious belongings which formed the dowry of a fiancée. Alternatively, the equivalent of the *νυμφοταμῖον* could be Aseneth's third room, which contained beautiful things.¹²⁴

As can be seen in the following chapters of this story, Aseneth and her servants did not live secluded lives in the tower because they were free to go back and forth from it and meet non-kin men. However, men were not allowed into Aseneth's room, which is elsewhere defined as an 'inner room', as opposed to the other two storage rooms which seem to be less private and more accessible.

When Aseneth's bed is described, it is underlined that she slept alone, suggesting that normally a married woman shared her bed with her husband. We later learn that Aseneth stopped living in her father's tower when she married Joseph,

and that she moved to Joseph's house after the marriage, where she also gave birth.

The story of Aseneth reminds us of a popular 18th Dynasty Egyptian folktale called 'The Doomed Prince',¹²⁵ where a prince falls in love with a girl who is locked up by her father in the upper floor of his tower-house.¹²⁶ Her father will only allow the girl to marry the man who manages to climb the tower and reach her:

Now the chief was without a son, and he had but one daughter and she was very fair. He had caused to be erected for her a stately tower with seventy windows, on the summit of a cliff 700 feet from the ground. The fame of the girl went abroad, and her father sent for all the sons of chiefs in the land and said to them: 'My daughter will be given in marriage to the youth who can climb up to her window.'¹²⁷

In legal documents, tower-houses are also mentioned in relation to women. In a Ptolemaic contract between descendants of Greek immigrant families from Cyrene,¹²⁸ we hear that an Apollonios owed a Demetria 400 drachmas, but instead of paying her he let her live in his *pyrgos* for one year.

Apollonios has leased to Demetria his tower inherited from his father in the village of Takona in the Oxyrhynchite nome, doors and all, for 1 year from the month Hyperberetaios of the first year, on condition that Demetria and her associates¹²⁹ shall inhabit this tower for the agreed term of the contract, using it in whatever manner they wish and having a right of way through the existing passage from the tower to the street.¹³⁰

We do not know whether Demetria used the tower as her house or for a particular activity. This also depends on the interpretation of 'the ones with her': were they 'her associates', as Rowlandson translates it, who shared a business (or a religious association) with her, conducted in the tower during the period of the lease? We do not know, but whatever is the case, Demetria shows a high level of independence, being the only one who puts her name on the contract, even if she formally acts through a guardian.

In a later will,¹³¹ a mother established that the ground floor of the entrance tower should belong to her daughter if she divorced from her husband and did not have a place to live. The will shows that, in the Roman Period, women maintained the Egyptian right¹³² to write a will and appoint their heirs independently from their husbands.

All these documents show that the tower was often inhabited, owned or rented by women. There could be different reasons for this: judging from the story of Aseneth, one reason could be that unmarried women required more protection and privacy than the other members of the family, so the highest building of her father's country estate was ideal. However, if we consider the woman's will for her daughter, it is clear there might have been an economic reason as well

for women to occupy small portions of towers; women were more often the most disadvantaged economically, especially if they were divorced or widowed. Therefore, the tower, when built as an annex of a house, could be partially or entirely rented to external people, as it could offer unmarried, divorced and widowed women a cheaper place to live. However, this was not always the case: Demetria did not seem to be economically disadvantaged at all, and it is likely that her use of the tower was not exclusively residential.

Many scholars study Late Dynastic and Greco-Roman *pyrgoi* in Egypt.¹³³ Lehmann, for example, compared Saite and Greco-Roman towers and modern tower-houses in Yemen. The oldest Yemenite towers are about 400 years old, but their design goes back much further. Consequently, the striking similarities they have with Egyptian towers is likely the result of a cultural *koine* between Egypt and the Near East, which continued into the medieval era, a time when tower-houses were still built in the Egyptian Fustat (9th–11th century AD).¹³⁴

Lehmann's research has focused on urban tower-houses, which in Egyptian centres, as well as in Yemen, seem to have been built so that they abut each other.¹³⁵ The urban tower-house seems to be similar in design to those found in the countryside, but certainly rural towers, like those in the story of Aseneth and in the papyrus concerning Apollonios and Aline, guaranteed more peace and privacy.

Privacy in modern Yemenite urban towers depends on their height: in fact, their flat crenellated roof is used as a residential space, so the person with the highest tower could spy on the others. Therefore, in Yemen the height of urban towers is agreed among neighbours and has been kept the same way for centuries. The height of towers was probably regulated in Ptolemaic Egypt as well, where the flat roof was used as a room.¹³⁶

Lehmann underlines other striking similarities between the Yemenite and Egyptian tower: the windows are made with wooden grids rather than with glass, and wood is also used for beams and to decorate niches. The structure of the towers is wider below and tapers to become narrower above, creating more distance between the towers towards the top. The most official and public spaces are downstairs, while the more private rooms are upstairs. In addition, there is a seasonal variation in the use of rooms: the smallest are more frequently used in cold weather, while big, airy rooms are more utilised in warm weather. Both Yemenite and Greco-Roman Egyptian towers have a roofed kiosk (Figure 6.3), which today is used as a comfortable, sheltered area for sleeping in the summer, and enjoying the breeze while staying in the shade.¹³⁷

Two particular similarities between Yemenite and Egyptian towers are especially relevant for us, as they concern the way women inhabited them. The first important similarity is the use of wooden bridges, which connect one tower with another. These bridges are used today to allow people to move from one structure to another, and in particular for women to move without being seen. Very similar bridges also connected the towers in Greco-Roman Egypt, according to the image from the Casa dei Pigmei in Pompeii.¹³⁸ Another similarity with Egypt is that modern Yemenite women also tend to live on the upper floors of the house: there

are literary attestations from Greco-Roman Egypt that describe women having their rooms on the upper floors.

These two resemblances with modern Yemen may imply that Greco-Roman Egyptian women lived apart from the rest of society and avoided being seen in public. However, in Chapter 1 I clearly showed that Greco-Roman Egyptian women were free to move, travel and manage their own business, so it seems unlikely that they wanted to hide while they moved from one tower to another. It is more plausible that the wooden bridges were simply built in Egypt as a comfortable passage between towers which could be used by both women and men, a feature then adopted in Islamic culture as a passage to keep women concealed.

These structurally concordant modern towers are places used for complete female segregation in some of the interior parts of Yemen. However, this is a non-traditional way of living, introduced only in the last few decades as a result of cultural and political change.¹³⁹ This social change greatly affected women's freedom, but it is so recent that it cannot have had a notable impact on the architecture of the towers. Gender segregation is an exception in Yemen while gender division is not; most of the time women have their own rooms, and tend to live on the upper floor of towers. Unlike segregated women, these women are free to go out and even to work with men.

These examples within Islamic culture do help our understanding of the idea of the gendered differentiation of space though. This idea of the division of domestic space between women and men does not depend on the quantity of space available; in other words, gender differentiation is not only a characteristic of large houses, which can dedicate some rooms exclusively to women and some rooms only to men. Rather, gender differentiation derives from a particular religious and moral belief, so it is strictly applied both within large and small domestic spaces. Indeed, in medieval Egypt the differentiation between male and female areas can be observed in domestic spaces of all sizes: great Ottoman palaces had separate courtyards and entrances for men and women, but also a small early medieval house in the Egyptian oasis of Dakhla had a division between female and male areas within the same small room.¹⁴⁰ Extreme cases of gender differentiation within very small domestic spaces can be seen in many other cultures, for instance within the Bedouin tent.¹⁴¹

As for Greco-Roman Egypt, we can see that rich women like Apollonios' wife and Aseneth had their own rooms, but when we consider more modest houses at this time, such gender separation is not attested. Unless new sources appear that contradict this, it seems for now that in Greco-Roman Egypt there was no ideology that led to a gendered differentiation of domestic space. The only exception to this could be the practice of providing a more protected room to unmarried women in the upper floors of houses and towers. However, examples of this normally only appear among richer families, more concerned about their reputation and finding a good husband for their daughters.

Considering the private function of the αἶθριον, as opposed to the αὐλή, and considering the private nature of the spaces located on the upper floor of houses, it seems to be the case that there was no gendered differentiation of the domestic

environment in Greco-Roman Egypt, only a division between public and private areas.

6.3 Menstruation and childbirth in domestic contexts

6.3.1 Menstruation: rethinking the theory of the room under the stairs

The evidence presented in section 5.2 suggests that in the Greco-Roman Period groups of women from Upper Egypt used a room in order to perform their purification. I will now consider again the Demotic papyri from the Louvre we discussed earlier¹⁴² in relation to other sources that mention this room, and its possible relationship with purification during menstruation.

Three Louvre Demotic papyri describe this room as a place where women perform their purification during menstruation. In these and other documents¹⁴³ the room is alternatively called: *hrr(.t)*,¹⁴⁴ *hrhr.t*,¹⁴⁵ *hlyl.t*.¹⁴⁶ Colin¹⁴⁷ tried to find a connection between this space and a space for women indicated in a Greek Ptolemaic document from Oxyrhynchos; this document is part of an unpublished papyrus, P. Fouad inv. 6.¹⁴⁸ The document has been dated by Colin to the 2nd century BC and includes two *enteuxeis* addressed to King Ptolemy VI Philometor by a group of priests of a male god, whose name is not preserved. The second *enteuxis* deals with the bad behaviour of a certain Apollonios, who seems to have violated a sacred area of the temple. In the document, the name of a place opposite a temple is mentioned, and in this place some women are having ‘their menstrual period’.

... καὶ ὑπ[ἐ]ρ ἄλλ[ου] τόπου τοῦ κατέναντι [τοῦ δεδη]λωμένου ἱεροῦ ἐν ᾧ καὶ εἰθισμέ[ναι εἰσὶν αἱ γυν]αῖκες αὐτῶν ἀφεδρίζεσθα[ι].¹⁴⁹

... and concerning another area (τόπος) in front of the mentioned temple where their women are used to menstruate/perform the ablutions.¹⁵⁰

The verb ἀφεδρίζεσθαι derives from the noun ἀφένδρος which, according to Pedanius Dioscorides,¹⁵¹ Galen¹⁵² and the Alexandrian Greek translation of Leviticus,¹⁵³ means ‘menstruation’. Colin also argued that the condition of menstruating, ἐν ἀφένδρῳ, corresponds to the Egyptian *m hsmn*.¹⁵⁴ Two other Greek words, τὰ γυναικεῖα¹⁵⁵ and τὰ καταμήνια,¹⁵⁶ were used in Greek as synonyms of ἀφένδρος.¹⁵⁷

The place where these women were menstruating in the *enteuxis* of P. Fouad inv. 6 is only generically defined as a τόπος which faces the sanctuary, so it is difficult to establish its nature. However, Colin agrees with Husson that τόπος might have been a building rather than just land.¹⁵⁸ If this was the case, it must have been a part of a building where these women lived, at least during this special time.

In support of the idea that the τόπος is a small building attached to a house, there is a papyrus from Karanis dating to AD 68,¹⁵⁹ in which the τόποι are small buildings built in the public courtyard of the house. Therefore, the place described in the 2nd century BC document could have been an independent annex of a house.

Assuming this is the case, it would probably have been in a public courtyard like the τόποι in Karanis. In fact, the public courtyard and its annexes were normally built near the main entrance, and this would explain why the τόπος was ‘facing the temple’; although the τόπος could still conceivably have been simply a room in the house which faced the temple.¹⁶⁰

Many scholars have called the room mentioned in the Louvre Papyri as a ‘room under the stairs’, and have identified this room in other earlier and later documents from Egypt written in Aramaic and Greek.¹⁶¹ Elephantine, in particular, seems to have been an area of Egypt where this room under the stairs was adopted in houses, for at least nine centuries.¹⁶² The earliest attestation of such a room can be found in some Aramaic documents written by the community of Jews who lived in Elephantine during the Late Dynastic Period.¹⁶³ In one of these documents, dating to 404 BC,¹⁶⁴ the Jew Anani, granted his daughter Lady Jehoishma, part of his house in a donation that would become effective after his death:

I gave to you that is the southern room, east of the large room of mine; and half the courtyard, that is half the *hyt* (as it is called in Egyptian); and half the stairway beneath which is the *peras*(-sized) storage area.”¹⁶⁵

In the Aramaic version of this document, the room under the stairs is defined as *byt prs*.¹⁶⁶ Scholars have translated it as the place of the size of a *peras*: the *peras* was a large unit of measurement used for silver. This means that the room under the stairs was considered to be a storage room of moderate dimensions.¹⁶⁷

The room under the stairs reappears nine centuries later, in three contracts, dating to 530, 586 and AD 590, which all concern the sale of the same house in Syene.¹⁶⁸ In these documents, the room under the stairs is referred to with the term ὑποπέσσιον.¹⁶⁹ However, the Greek term is also associated with an Egyptian term, (τ)χ(ρ)ῆρε,¹⁷⁰ which is used in the document to specify the function of the room. For example, in the AD 586 document, a woman sells to a man her half share of the house in Syene. The rooms sold in the act are listed in this way:

... μέρος ἀπὸ τοῦ κελλίου ἐν πρώτῃ στέγῃ νεύοντος εἰς βορρᾶν εἰς τὴν δημοσίαν ῥύμην καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐπάνω αὐτοῦ συμποσίου ἐν δευτέρᾳ στέγῃ νεύοντος εἰς λίβα εἰς τὸ πλάτος τοῦ πεσσοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ ὑποπεσίου ἦτοι χρῆρε ἐν πρώτῃ στέγῃ καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ νοτίνου συμποσίου ἐν τρίτῃ στέγῃ νεύοντος εἰς βορρᾶν εἰς τὸ κοινὸν αἶθριον καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐπάνω αὐτοῦ ἀέρος ἕως ἀέρος κ(αὶ) ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀπηλιωτικοῦ μεγάλου δώματος ἕως ἀέρος . . .¹⁷¹

the room on the first floor, facing north 26 toward the public road; and above it a living room on the second floor, facing 27 west toward the landing 8 of the stair; and the (recess) under the stair, namely, (the) chrere, on the first floor; 28 and the southern living room on the third floor, facing north toward the common 29 courtyard; and the roof terrace above it, up to the air;¹⁷²

The *byt prs* of the 5th century BC Aramaic documents and the ὑποπέσσιον / (τ)χ(ρ) ῆρε of the 6th century AD documents show a continuity in the use of a recess under

the stairs in this area of Egypt. In addition, the term (τ)χ(ρ)ῆρε can be considered as a Greek transliteration of the term *hrr(.t) / hrhr.t.*¹⁷³

However, in none of these documents is this room linked with the purification rite for menstruation indicated in the Louvre Papyri from Thebes. The reason could be that the room under the stairs in the Elephantine houses did not have the same function as that indicated in the Louvre Papyri, especially in Jewish houses, where they seem to be small storage areas rather than proper rooms. Nevertheless, the absence of a specific reference to a *hsmn/καταμήνια* or ἄφεδρος, could also mean that this room had more than one function, since the period of menstruation is limited to 5 or 6 days a month. Equally, if the Byzantine ὑποπέσσιον / (τ)χ(ρ)ῆρε still maintained the same function as indicated in the Demotic papyri, it is possible that its purpose was not indicated in the contract because it was commonly known and taken for granted.

Two centuries later, the room under the stairs appears again in a contract from the village of Jeme; the contract concerns the division of a house between an Abigaia and her aunt Elizabeth. This text, contained in P.*KRU* 35, was recently examined by Wilfong,¹⁷⁴ who also considered the use of this room under the stairs in relation to the texts of the Demotic Louvre Papyri. In the contract, Abigaia declares which share of the house should go to her aunt Elizabeth:

You have received the room beneath the stairs and the room whose door opens north onto the stairs, and you control the whole veranda, whose door opens north onto the stairs, and the entire grain storage area, which is above the veranda, up to the top . . . The outer door, the foyer, the water-holder, and the stairway are common areas between us, unless building is carried out in the house: if building is done, then each one will bring his staircase to his portion, in such a way that we are each satisfied with the two portions.¹⁷⁵

In this papyrus, the room beneath the stairs is called **ΕΤΖΑΠΤΩΡΤ**,¹⁷⁶ which, according to Crum's Coptic dictionary, literally means a room 'in angle below the staircase'.¹⁷⁷

The literary material shows that the room under the stairs is attested in Thebes and Elephantine; among these sources, only the Ptolemaic sources from Thebes mention a practice of purification in a room under the stairs. The only other Greco-Roman attestation of such a practice comes from P. *Fouad* inv. 6 from Oxyrhynchus; this unfortunately is quite vague about the kind of room used for menstruation. The term τόπος, used is too generic to be able to be identified as a room under the stairs.

Looking at the sources for this room under the stairs, I think that scholars have accurately analysed the possible philological links between the documents, identifying the presence of a long-lasting architectural tradition. However, any association between this sub-stair room and the practice of purification during menstruation, cannot be proven through the literary sources alone, as they do not give us a precise idea of the size and the location of these rooms within the house.

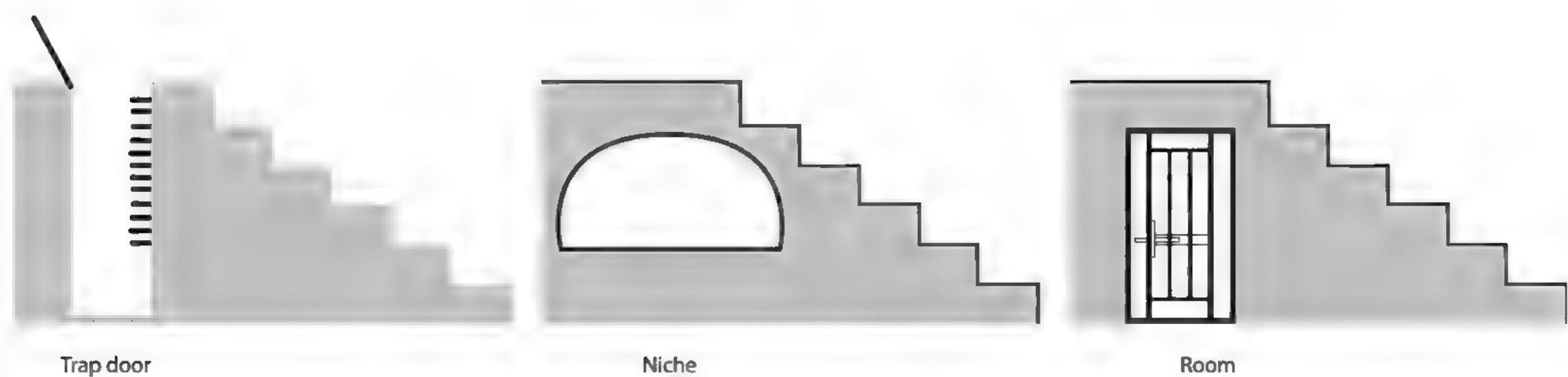


Figure 6.2 Three possible uses of the room under the stairs: 1) room accessed from the landing through a trap door, 2) a niche, 3) room accessed through a door.

Even though the archaeological evidence is not helpful for the reconstruction of the perishable pavilions in the garden, or kiosks on the unpreserved upper storeys of the house (Figure 6.3), it can help us reconstruct rooms on the ground floor and in basements. In this way, we can still examine many rooms under the stairs from Greco-Roman houses (Figure 6.2).

The first thing that can be noticed if we look at an actual house section is that the room under the stairs could be on different floors, because many houses had several floors and several flights of stairs. Such a room had different forms and can be archaeologically interpreted as:

1) A niche: the space beneath the stairs of both Dynastic and Greco-Roman houses was often occupied by a niche, either used for storage, or containing a jar or an oven.¹⁷⁸

2) A secret room, hidden in the staircase, accessed through a trap door on one of the staircase landings: trap doors leading to underground chambers were not found exclusively within the floors of houses but also on the landings of internal staircases. These trap doors gave access to rooms hidden within the staircase. Examples of such secret rooms can be observed in many Hellenistic and Roman houses from the Fayyum, for instance, in Bakchias,¹⁷⁹ Soknopaiou Nesos,¹⁸⁰ and Tebtynis.¹⁸¹ House VIII in Bakchias (Figure 6.3) had four flights of stairs arranged around a central pillar.¹⁸² The first ramp of stairs led to the first landing where a trap door (0.46 m × 0.38 m) on the floor gave access to a room hidden in the staircase (1.20 m × 0.51 m, h 1.16 m)¹⁸³ which had a vaulted roof, a mudbrick floor and plastered walls.¹⁸⁴

A secret room hidden in the staircase was also found in a large Hellenistic house in Soknopaiou Nesos: House II 201.¹⁸⁵ The trap door on the landing of the stairs leads to the underground chamber W. Chamber W had a hole in its west facing wall; thieves probably broke into the chamber in search of valuable objects.¹⁸⁶ All these secret chambers in staircases are so small and difficult to access for an average sized person that they seem more likely to have been rooms for storing and protecting goods, rather than rooms which people themselves could use.

3) A room accessible through a normal door on the ground floor beneath the flight of stairs: in house VIII in Bakchias, the space beneath the flight of stairs was occupied by an actual room, accessed through a normal door (Figure 6.3). As well as this room hidden within the staircase, there was also a room under the

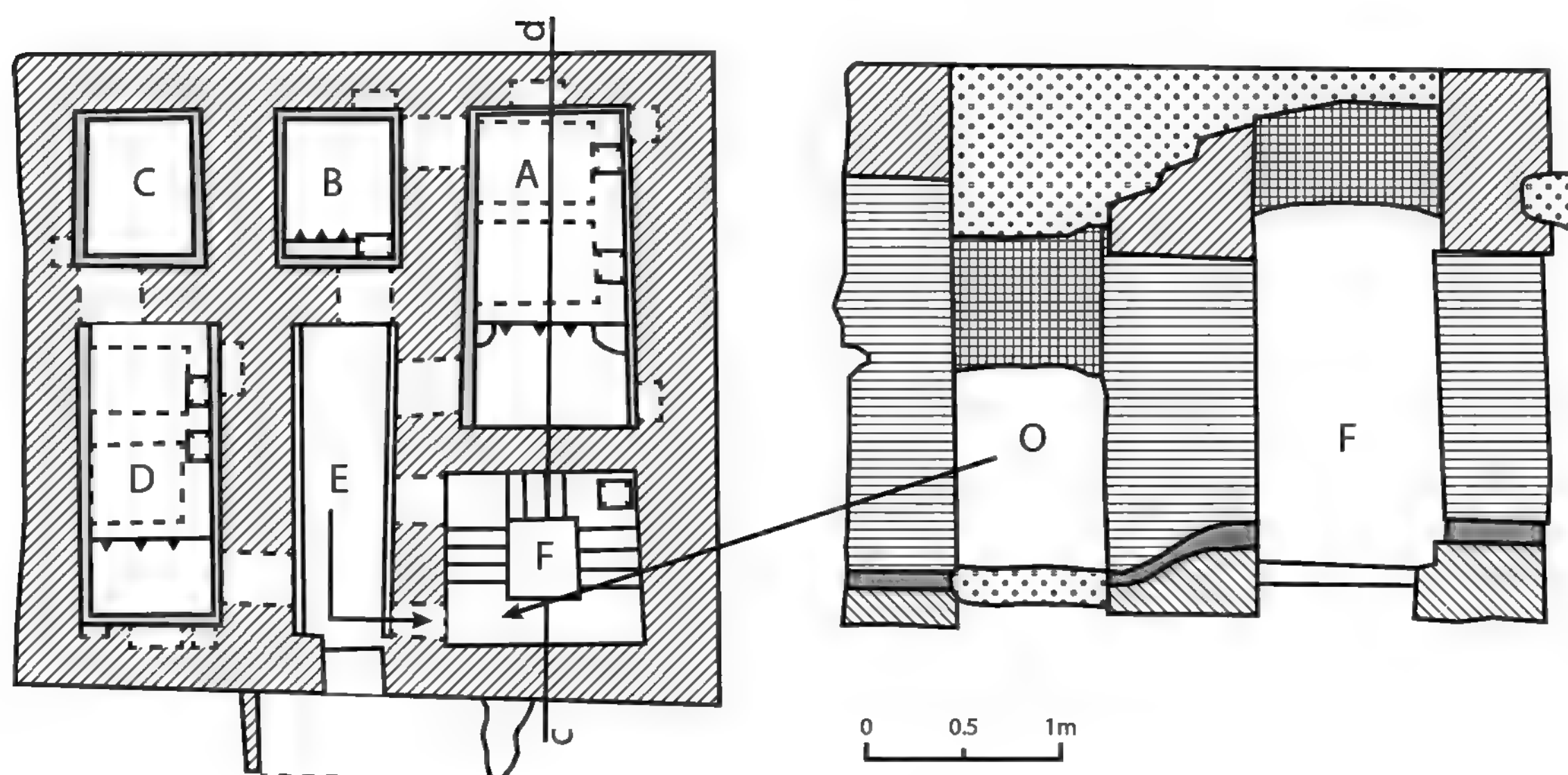


Figure 6.3 Bakchias, house VIII. Plan and section c–d. The arrow in the plan shows the access from room E to the room under the staircase O. On the right a section of the room O and the staircase F.

stairs, room O. This room was accessed from the central room of house E, and had a normal-sized vertical entrance, originally occupied by a door.¹⁸⁷ Unfortunately, room O was never investigated in detail because it was too dangerous to access, but the report attests that it was very small and had a paved floor (in a phase which preceded its filling with sand).¹⁸⁸ The paving may suggest that it was not just a secondary place for storage but it was still too small for a person to spend much time in comfortably.

In the Louvre Papyri the room under the stairs is used for menstrual purification in two Theban houses where women have to make their ‘(menstrual) purification in the women’s room (= room under the stairs)’,¹⁸⁹ However, the small room under the stairs in Bakchias, as well as the description of this room as being of very modest dimensions in the aforementioned Late Dynastic Aramaic contract from Elephantine,¹⁹⁰ suggest that it could not be a comfortable place where women spent some time during their menstruation. Therefore, we have to consider another function that made the room somehow important for menstruating women.

In the example from Jeme, two women inherit a house that is divided into two smaller family units, with a common entrance; the share of Abigaia includes the room beneath the stairs. The example from Jeme reminds us of the medieval apartments in Cairo where houses were sometimes divided into small flats with a common entrance, called *ʿrab*.¹⁹¹ These places were rented exclusively to families which included a female member.¹⁹² Single men could only rent a smaller apartment without a kitchen. The *ʿrab* did not have a private entrance, but shared a common entrance and was accessible from the staircase. Each *ʿrab* had its own kitchen and latrine, which were both considered essential for women in these medieval Egyptian houses.

That this room might be a latrine has not been discussed yet, but considering the association between the room and menstruation, a latrine could be a likely

interpretation. Indeed, the room under the stairs in Greco-Roman Egyptian houses could be compared to the *subscalare* in the imperial Roman house, which was often used as a latrine.¹⁹³

In Chapter 5.2, I showed that menstruation required a private act of purification in the room under the stairs; purification should be considered a ritual, but it is a very important hygienic matter. A menstruating woman, as well as a woman who had discharges during the postpartum period, needed a place to wash frequently. A space like the room under the stairs from Bakchias could have been paved not because it was an important room, but because the blood from menstruation (and maybe childbirth) could have been washed away more easily. In addition, according to Soranus, the newborn also had to be washed soon after birth and kept clean and swaddled,¹⁹⁴ so the mother or the slaves had to be close to a place with water. This is a description of the room where the newborn had to be washed daily, according to Soranus:

One must select a small room which is moderately warm, and must exclude bright light. After the midwife has sat down and spread a linen towel or a piece of cloth over her lap, she should lay the newborn down and . . . anoint it with lukewarm olive oil . . . and with her right hand she should pour warm water, well-tempered to the pleasure of the newborn.¹⁹⁵

In the story by Lysias mentioned above, we have an attestation of a bathroom used for washing the family's newborn baby, located downstairs.¹⁹⁶ In Dynastic Egypt the act of making morning ablutions is called *jʿi*.¹⁹⁷ Later on, the term for public bath appears in Demotic Ptolemaic tax documents with the names *s.t-eyw(.t)/s.t-ywn(.t)*.¹⁹⁸ The terms corresponds in Greek documents to the Greek βαλανεῖον which is used to indicate both public baths and private bathrooms.¹⁹⁹ However, it is not certain whether the Demotic terms *s.t-eyw(.t)/s.t-ywn(.t)* were used for private bathrooms.

Two Roman papyri attest to the presence of a βαλανεῖον within the house, but also the use of straw and wood in order to heat the room.²⁰⁰ The term λουτρών is also attested and becomes more common in the Byzantine Period. However it is likely that βαλανεῖον and λουτρών were two different kinds of bathroom. Perhaps the first was a bathroom with more than just a room and warm water available, while the other was just a single small room with cold water.²⁰¹

Another object has been associated with latrines, but its interpretation is not certain because it is only mentioned in one papyrus.²⁰² This is a rent contract from Alexandria dated to 13 BC. In it the tenant of the house declares that by the end of the contract he will give back the house with the doors, the windows and the keys and also other things which are within the house: the wheel, the wooden winch, the wooden lever in the wall and the two λασανίται δίφροι.

We only have this one attestation of this word: λασανίται derives from λάσανα, a pierced container or tripod described in Hippocratic treatises as a night stool and seat for people suffering from retained placenta or anus prolapse.²⁰³ The term δίφρος means seat or couch and was used as the name for the birthing


stool. Alternatively it could be interpreted as a pierced vase or latrine, or a tripod where a water bucket were deposited.²⁰⁴ We need to be cautious as to possible interpretations, given the absence of archaeological contexts, but if we consider the evidence provided by the Hippocratic treatises, and the possible link between the ceramic chamber pot and the birthing stool, I think that the λασανίται δίφροι could be seats used for childbirth, as well as possible items for the latrine.

As a toilet seat, the λασανίτη could also have been a pierced wooden stool like the one found in the tomb of the architect Kha in Deir el-Medina.²⁰⁵ Kha's wooden stool was interpreted as a commode, a portable toilet seat where a chamber pot or a bed of sand was placed underneath.²⁰⁶ In NK houses toilet seats could also be made of stone: a very well preserved movable toilet seat was found in Amarna and is now at the Cairo Museum.²⁰⁷ Borchardt has discovered and discussed several privies with fitted brick toilets in the houses of Amarna.²⁰⁸ These fitted toilets like the movable ones did not have a deep pit underneath so the inhabitants were probably inserting a low jar, which was regularly brought out of the house to be emptied.²⁰⁹ The common use of indoor privies in the Late Dynastic Period is attested by Herodotus,²¹⁰ who observed that the Egyptians preferred to 'ease themselves' indoors while they ate outdoors.²¹¹

There were also public baths for ablutions, especially in the Roman Period, a precious facility for poorer people without a bathroom at home. Since the Dynastic Period, people without a bathroom used many different kind of containers to wash, which are often mentioned by ostraca and papyri, because they were often included in wills and marriage contracts.

For the Dynastic Period, the *Wörterbuch* offers three Egyptian words for washing bowl: ꜥ3b.t, b3.y, ḥsmn.y.²¹² In some documents coming from the Ramesside archive of Lady Naunakhte in Deir el-Medina, a bronze washing bowl, weighing 13 *deben* of copper and valued at ten sacks of emmer, is mentioned with the name *mtwt*.²¹³

In O.Cochrane + O.Gardiner 264, a Ramesside hieratic ostrakon from Deir el-Medina, a woman lists her property, which includes personal objects and jewellery. The first object she mentions is a bronze washing bowl:²¹⁴ in Greek papyri dating to the Greco-Roman Period, the name of these containers is well known because they were often included in marriage contracts:²¹⁵ λουτήρ, λουτήριον, λούτριον, λουτρίδιον, χαλκίον, μάκτρα, σκάφιον, τρούλλιον, ύδρία, and ύδρεϊον. These recipients for ablutions were used daily, as well as in the context of domestic religious purification, as Philo of Alexandria described them.²¹⁶

One of the aforementioned names used in Dynastic Egypt for washing basin is  ḥsmn.y; this name is translated as washbasin and pitcher.²¹⁷ These implements were certainly used for purification with water and natron in the official religious rituals of kings. However, the purification still had a private character as it happened in a private room of a temple called the ḥ.t ḥsmn (house of natron).²¹⁸

However, it is very likely that the ḥsmn.y was also used by people for domestic religious ablutions. As I showed in 3.3, the main reasons for women to carry out ablutions were sexual intercourse, menstruation and childbirth. If we recall now once again the sentence in one of the Louvre Papyri: 'you should make your

(menstrual) purification in the women's room (= room under the stairs)',²¹⁹ it is very likely that by 'purification' what is meant is that women were expected to wash themselves in that room.

Another piece of evidence for the use of the room under the stairs as a latrine, may be seen in modern Arabic. The Demotic words for this room are *hrr(.t)*,²²⁰ *hrhr.t*,²²¹ and *hllyl.t*. In an Arabic dialect from Upper Egypt the modern term *harara*,²²² very similar to the Demotic *hrr(.t)*, is used informally to say 'bathroom'. In addition, in Medieval Arabic the term (Beyt or Kursi) *Khalā*,²²³ similar to *hllyl.t*, is used as the word for latrine.²²⁴ Furthermore, in 20th century mudbrick houses from Egypt, the space under the stairs is called *hanut*, and it is often used to house a water jug.²²⁵

The Egyptian words *hsmn* and *hsmn.y* clearly show that the Egyptians associated menstruation with the use of a latrine. I have also noticed that the Greek word ἄφεδρος, menstruation, which appears in P. *Fouad*. inv. 6 for women who are menstruating (ἀφεδρίζεσθαι), may be compared with a Greek noun deriving from it: ὁ ἀφεδρών, ὄνος, which means 'latrine'. This term is quite rare and only appears in the Gospels of Mark²²⁶ and Matthew,²²⁷ and in a law which regulates the town clerks' maintenance of public toilets in the city of Pergamon.²²⁸ Judging from these sources, this term was in use in the Greco-Roman world in the 1st–2nd centuries AD.

We can also say something about the furniture of this privy. Hesychius of Alexandria in the 5th century AD made a *Lexicon* of rare Greek terms whose meaning must have fallen out of use in Byzantine Egypt.²²⁹ In this *Lexicon* he provides the definition of ἀφεδρεῦσαι as 'ἐπὶ δίφρῳ κάθισαι' (sitting on a seat),²³⁰ so perhaps the ἀφεδρών indicates a small private latrine with a seat (δίφρος).²³¹ Judging from the example of movable seats (λασανίται δίφροι) from a house in Alexandria,²³² the seat of the ἀφεδρών could have been a movable item as well. Finally, if we consider the attestations for water jugs, there was probably a jug in the ἀφεδρών to wash and clean the impurity from the body, and wash away the impurity of the ἄφεδρος.²³³

In conclusion, documents from within the Louvre Papyri collection provide us with evidence for a practice of hygienic and ritual ablution that took place in the room under the stairs. The archaeological evidence confirms that these rooms could have been used as latrines, while also indicating that they were not designed to be utilised for a significant period of time. As a latrine, the room under the stairs would also have been an ideal place where a newborn could be washed and swaddled, according to the parameters set by Soranus at least. The toilet was used as a latrine but also for private ablutions, including menstrual ablutions.

The archaeological evidence from Greco-Roman Egyptian houses also shows that some did not have any room under the stairs, only a niche for storage. Therefore, in these cases the inhabitants probably had their toilet either in a different part of the house or in an external annex.

6.3.2 *Childbirth: external pavilion or room within the house?*

In previous chapters, I have shown how every phase of childbirth was ritualised. One of the first rituals before a woman gave birth was setting up the space in the birthing room. The moment of childbirth was the initial part of a liminal phase for the mother and the child in which they both waited to be admitted into the family and into society. The moment of childbirth is rarely depicted in Dynastic Egyptian iconography, it being confined mainly to religious imagery. However, the moment of postpartum is depicted in NK ostraca, especially from Deir el-Medina, where they show a woman sitting on a stool or on a bed, attended by a female or Nubian slave, who normally brings her a mirror and other toilet items.


These very elusive images of confinement have stimulated the imagination of scholars for many years. The main theory which was formed, was one where childbirth happened in an airy structure called a 'birth arbour', also called a 'birth pavilion' or birth bower.²³⁴ Other scholars have decided to follow the idea that the room of confinement was inside the house,²³⁵ and others have argued for the front room of Deir el-Medina houses as a possible candidate.²³⁶


Before discussing all these theories in more detail, it is necessary to make a distinction between childbirth and confinement. Labour lasted for a few hours, while confinement lasted for many days.²³⁷ As a consequence, the space for childbirth had to be adequate but not necessarily as comfortable as the place of confinement. Therefore, it is possible that the room for childbirth and the room for confinement were not one and the same. We do know, however, that sometimes the furniture used during labour and confinement was different: as we saw in Chapter 2, women gave birth on a stool, while during confinement they are depicted sitting or lying on a bed.

6.3.2.1 *Pavilion*

The pavilion was a hut made of reeds and mats which was commonly used in Egypt during the Dynastic Period and is still used today in the desert. These were the houses of the poorest people, while the rich used them as a shelter for cattle, as a place for shade in the garden, or as a temporary place for spending the night if they were far from home.²³⁸ The workmen who built the tombs of the Valley of the Kings in Deir el-Medina, for example, built some huts, still preserved today, near the Valley, in order to spend the night near the site during working days.

The pavilion was used by ordinary Egyptians in a functional way as a place to stay temporarily. However, it could also be a place for diplomacy and a display of status for the elite and royalty. For instance, royalty are represented enjoying the shade under a pavilion,²³⁹ but the pavilion-tent was also the place where the king welcomed his guests.²⁴⁰




Some Dynastic sources also suggest that both ordinary people and the elite considered the pavilion an important structure during the events of childbirth and confinement. The earliest visual representation of the pavilion may be the hieroglyphic sign for giving birth (*ms*, F33) . This statement might sound surprising

because this sign has been interpreted by Gardiner as three fox skins tied together, and nobody has ever proposed any alternative interpretation. However, in my opinion, this sign is actually very similar to a hut made of reeds, like the ones that are still built today in Egypt. In addition, the hieroglyph for giving birth, which since the time of the OK had existed as a composite sign,²⁴¹ shows the image of the ‘three fox skins’ associated with a woman giving birth . If we accept Gardiner’s interpretation of the sign, it would be hard to explain why a woman was represented giving birth on three fox skins. In contrast, an association between the woman and the place where she gave birth makes perfect sense. In fact, in alternative versions of the hieroglyph of birth, the woman is lying on the birth bricks, the main symbol of the birthing place.²⁴² Therefore, the interpretation of sign *ms*, F33 as a hut-pavilion seems more appropriate.








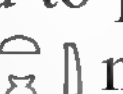
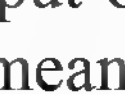

One of the earliest Egyptian attestations of the pavilion is in a spell, dated to the MK, in which a mother invokes the goddess Hathor, asking her to go to her pavilion (I put in bold the term used for pavilion):

mj nꜥj ḥw.t-ḥr.w tꜣyꜥj ḥnw.t m pꜣyꜥj (vs. 11,1) *jmw nfr m tꜣy wnw.t nfr(.t) m tꜣy mhy.t ndm.t . . .*²⁴³

Come to me, Hathor, my mistress, to **my fine pavilion**, in this happy hour, with (?) this pleasant north (wind) . . .²⁴⁴

This invocation implies that the labour was happening in an airy structure in an open place, refreshed by the northern wind. This structure is defined as a tent or pavilion in the *Wörterbuch*    *jmw*.²⁴⁵

In the NK there are many different kinds of attestations for the pavilion. The most important examples include: a mention in a spell for a mother and child;²⁴⁶ in a group of ostraca from Deir el-Medina;²⁴⁷ and on a group of statuettes from Amarna²⁴⁸ The pavilion also appears on some wall paintings coming from the houses of Amarna and Deir el-Medina.²⁴⁹

The term *jtn.w n h*      appears in a spell of the *Zaubersprüche für Mutter und Kind*,²⁵⁰ in a medical recipe to cure ‘stomach problems in a child’; the *jtn.w n h* in particular is ‘used to put out the child’s fever’.²⁵¹ According to the *Wörterbuch*,²⁵² *jtn.w*     means ‘riddles’, while the term *h*  in this context has been interpreted by Eaton as a ‘temporary reed shelter’ where the newborn was protected by demons and from ailments.²⁵³ This shelter according to Eaton could have been used as a temporary magical structure, which evoked the marshy environment where Isis had given birth to Horus. However, Eaton noticed that the word *jtn.w*, also used in the Ebers papyrus,²⁵⁴ literally means ‘riddles’ but also ‘ashes’, and so she thinks that the *h*-structure could have been burnt when it was discarded and its ashes were used to cure children.²⁵⁵ The term *h* can also be found in other medical recipes.²⁵⁶

Eaton discusses who could have used the pavilions in ancient Egypt for childbirth. According to her, these structures belonged to the poor because their houses were too small to give mothers and children enough privacy.²⁵⁷ I agree with this, although only in part. The poorest people in Egypt certainly had smaller houses

than the rich, but what changed between the rich and the poor was not just the size but also the materials that people could use for building their houses. Richer people could use mudbrick and silt mortar, while those who were poorer used a mixture of clay and straw or reeds. Despite the difference in size between the most modest and average houses, it should not be ruled out that inhabitants of both built temporary huts as annexes to host their wives and newborn children. This still happens in many African cultures: sometimes women receive their hut to have a private space, as in the case of the Dogon,²⁵⁸ or the Kasena.²⁵⁹ Sometimes, there is a marked religious significance behind women's isolation in huts during postpartum and menstruation: this is the case with the Falasha, an Ethiopian Jewish group.²⁶⁰

However, the pavilion represented in NK iconography seems to be much more than a perishable structure used by the poor to make up for a lack of space. Indeed, the context for the images of the pavilion are not exclusively domestic; they are also funerary and religious, suggesting a symbolic importance which goes well beyond a mere practical use. In NK images on ostraca and wall paintings, the birth pavilion is an airy structure supported by papyriform columns, around which there are convolvulus vines with flowers. Under this structure there is a scene related to the postpartum phase, normally a mother with a child assisted by female servants, with some variation within this (Figure 6.4).



Figure 6.4 Detail from ostracon from Deir el-Medina: a mother is breastfeeding her baby, sitting on a birth stool under a pavilion. The pavilion is decorated with convolvulus vines.

In the gamma chamber of the Royal Tomb of Amarna, there is an image which seems to represent a birth pavilion;²⁶¹ the scene represents the mourning for the death of one of the daughters of Akhenaton, Meketaten, who died after having given birth to a lively child. A pavilion, probably with a celebratory function, had already been set up to host the princess and her child, but, after Meketaten's unexpected death, the place was converted into a funerary pavilion. Arnold defines this pavilion as a *sh ntr*, a pavilion for the divine birth, which was originally built with reeds for daily use and gradually assumed a religious connotation, especially linked to childbirth.²⁶² Assuming that the *sh ntr* derived from actual childbirth huts, we could consider *sh ntr* as a fourth name to define this pavilion, already called by the names *jm.w*, *j3m.w* and *h*.

Other famous images of the pavilion come from the workmen's village of Deir el-Medina. These workmen were a privileged class in NK Egypt who used their drawing skills on ostraca to express their own personality artistically, something that had been rare in Egyptian art previously. They chose these objects to depict their everyday lives, including images of their women with their newborn children.²⁶³ The images show women sitting on a stool holding a baby on their lap (Figure 6.4); they are almost naked and have a peculiar hairstyle, divided into three locks. The mothers are assisted by a servant, who brings a mirror. In one of the ostraca there are small winged figurines, who seem to represent the god Bes.²⁶⁴

Brunner-Traut was the first to notice the iconography of the pavilion in the ostraca from Deir el-Medina,²⁶⁵ and she called this structure a 'Wochenlaube'. She noticed how much these structures are similar to the mammisi, the Greco-Roman temple celebrating the birth of the divine child, something that could hardly be a coincidence in her view. She claims that there is no evidence for NK mammisis because they were not built in stone, and that it is likely that there was some sort of celebration for the birth of divine children, for which a perishable celebratory pavilion was built. Brunner-Traut herself claims that this kind of structure was also used for many other functions: 'as shelters for cattle' and humorously enough, she adds they could even be used as 'places for extra-marital affairs' or 'temporary brothels'.²⁶⁶ A similar structure with papyriform columns, but with grape vines rather than convolvulus examples, is also represented on a faïence plate: a young woman, flanked by a monkey, stands under the pavilion and is fishing from her garden.²⁶⁷

Some characters and some objects consistently appear in the birth pavilion iconography:²⁶⁸ the woman is dressed in a transparent dress; when she sits on a bed or on a stool her feet are put on a foot-table for comfort.²⁶⁹ She is assisted by maidens who offer the mother a mirror, a drink or make-up items;²⁷⁰ she is offered fruit²⁷¹ or she is given make-up,²⁷² and a Nubian maiden may be shown washing her feet.²⁷³ Another maiden is shown styling the woman's hair.²⁷⁴

The image of the god Bes appears on sixteen images out of twenty-nine, mirrors appear in eleven scenes. Kohl pots appear in seven images and always with a mirror; broad collars are less frequent but do appear occasionally. There is also the image of the snake, which recalls the cobra snake Meretseger, who received a

cult in Deir el-Medina.²⁷⁵ Backhouse also identifies a distinctive sub-group, called ‘elaborate beds’;²⁷⁶ a distinctive iconography defines them as a coherent group. In all scenes, the bed has feet shaped like Bes, with scalloped edges and a thick mattress. In addition, in all the scenes the main figure faces the viewer’s right, breastfeeding, and appears naked except for a broad collar. A mirror and kohl pots are present either in the background or as items of presentation.

The same iconography described above on the ostraca can also be seen in terracotta statuettes, representing miniature beds or mothers and children on a bed; these are found at Deir el-Medina and El-Amarna.²⁷⁷ We also see such imagery in mural paintings from houses at El-Amarna and Deir el-Medina.²⁷⁸

In Deir el-Medina houses, pavilion scene paintings were also found on mysterious bed-shaped structures, which have been associated many times in the past with childbirth and confinement. These bed-shaped structures were found in twenty-eight out of the seventy houses excavated in Deir el-Medina, and were always in the first room of the house, normally in the corner of the room.²⁷⁹ They were 1.70 m long, 0.80 m wide and 0.75 m tall, and were fully or partially enclosed by a brick wall; the beds could be accessed via a small ramp with a few steps.²⁸⁰ The wall around these structures was often plastered and whitewashed, with some decorated with these pavilion scenes. These structures have been called ‘lits clos’, and were at first interpreted as cultic places but also as beds used for childbirth.²⁸¹ The debate about their use continued though,²⁸² with some scholars claiming they had a practical use rather than a cultural one because they occupied a large part of the important front room.²⁸³ However, the theory that it was used as a bed has lost favour because it would have been too uncomfortable. In addition, ‘lits clos’ are all located in the least private room of the house, so it is more likely that they were status symbols and/or cultic installations, rather than beds. So a cultic function seems the most likely one.²⁸⁴

In the workmen’s village of Amarna, forty-six brick structures similar to the ‘lit clos’ were found in the gardens of private houses. The kiosks in the gardens have different sizes and different degrees of complexity in their plan. According to the reconstruction proposed by Ikram,²⁸⁵ some were just small shrines with a raised platform and stairs, similar to the ‘lit clos’ and to the altars found in the houses of Amarna. Others were much bigger in size and resembled small temples. Cult statues and wall paintings of Akhenaton, Nefertiti and of the couple worshipping the Aten were found in these structures, suggesting that the house inhabitants used them to worship the royal family and the Aten as divine triad. However, the larger garden structures might have had other functions as well, maybe connected with childbirth and confinement.

The evidence from these houses in Amarna shows in general that the workman community gave a great deal of importance to ritual practices around birth and confinement:²⁸⁶ birth scenes were so important to them that they painted them in the front room of their houses where they could be displayed as a status symbol. The celebration of the confinement and the mother is made clear not only by the position of the paintings in the house, but also by the similarity between the representations of common mothers and divine/royal mothers.

The iconography from houses and ostraca suggest that the pavilion was a physical structure rather than just a symbolic place represented in idealised childbirth scenes. The Westcar Papyrus tells us that the birth of Ruddjedet took place in a closed room,²⁸⁷ so, generalising from this, we can propose three possible explanations for the function of the pavilion:

1. It could be a temporary or permanent structure built in the garden or on the roof, used for both childbirth and confinement in the summer, whereas the room inside the house was used during the winter;
2. The pavilion was used for confinement while the more protected room inside the house was used during childbirth;
3. Childbirth, and perhaps confinement, initially took place in a pavilion, as indicated by its symbolic representation and possibly by the hieroglyph *ms*, already used in the OK. However, practices around childbirth changed over the centuries and a more comfortable bedroom might have replaced the old pavilion.

In the Greco-Roman Period, the pavilion received its greatest symbolic representation in the *mammisi*. It would be tempting to look for possible similarities between the architecture of the *mammisi* and the symbols used for the Dynastic pavilion, in order to understand whether the domestic structure influenced the religious one. However, this research concerns the domestic context, so we need to focus on that. Currently, I think that the birth pavilion inspired the symbolic structure of the *mammisi* but, at the same time, this pavilion continued to exist within the domestic context.

In fact, evidence from papyri shows that pavilions were still built in many Greco-Roman Egyptian houses. Egyptian domestic architecture did not change radically in the Greco-Roman Period, so allowing us to identify the Greco-Roman ‘descendant’ of the Dynastic birth pavilion.

In this way, the pavilion in Greco-Roman Egyptian houses could be a structure:

1. in the garden;
2. in the public or private courtyard;
3. on the roof.

1) GARDEN

In the Greco-Roman Period there are attestations of several kinds of buildings in the garden of the house. The garden was called *k3m* in Demotic²⁸⁸ and κήπος, κηπίον, παράδεισος in Greek.²⁸⁹ When considering the presence of a pavilion in the garden, we have to keep in mind of course that not all houses had enough space for a garden. In cities and villages only rich houses had one, while rural houses, where there was more space, allowed even modest houses to have vines, orchards and gardens.

In the aforementioned first story of Setna Khaemwese,²⁹⁰ the protagonist Setna visits Tabubu, a priestess of Bastet in her house in Bubastis, by the temple.

Tabubu's house is described as tall, (maybe it was a tower but this is never specified), and surrounded by a wall. The house also had a garden on the northern side and a garden storehouse or garden room. There is not much agreement about how to translate the name that is given for this structure in the story: *p3 pr n p3 k3m*. According to Griffith's translation it is a 'chamber of the garden';²⁹¹ Lichtheim defines it as a 'storehouse in the garden';²⁹² Tait 'the garden-house'.²⁹³

In the story, Setna is mysteriously attracted to this structure, so it is unlikely that it was a simple storage room. Setna goes to Tabubu's house with the purpose of seducing her, so maybe he considers the garden house as a possible place for their erotic meeting. However, Tabubu does not bring Setna into the garden house: instead, she asks him to follow her upstairs on the staircase of the house (*trt n p3 ʿ.wy*).²⁹⁴ The room where Setna and Tabubu are supposed to have intercourse is Tabubu's room; in the text it is defined as *pr*. Lichtheim translates this as 'storehouse' and it seems from her translation that they are lying in the building in the garden. However, Tait translated the second room as 'room', and Griffith as 'chamber'.

This story shows that some houses in the Ptolemaic Period probably had a garden house that had the function of a bedroom. However, its definition as *pr* is too vague to attribute a more specific purpose.

Greek papyri mention other small structures that occupied the garden of the house: the *καλύβη*, the *κέλλιον* and the *μονόχωρον* or *μονοικίδιον*. The *καλύβη* was a sort of hut, a semi-permanent structure built on the roof, in the garden and in the courtyard of houses. Husson records several papyri that mention it, and also includes a fine drawing to show what it may have looked like.²⁹⁵

The *κέλλιον*, and its variations: *κέλλα*, *κελλάριον*, *κελλάρικον* are attested from the 2nd century AD, and considering the context, these terms could indicate a small room or a small building, and a group of papyri show that it could have been in different places inside or outside the house.²⁹⁶ Within the house it was mentioned inside a *συμπόσιον*,²⁹⁷ but it could also be in the entrance tower. As a building outside the house,²⁹⁸ it could be used for storage, but also as a very small house where an owner could house labourers. In the latter case, the houses were aligned in regular rows and were very close to one another.²⁹⁹ Before *κέλλα*, the term *ταμεῖον/τάμιον* was used during the Ptolemaic-Early Roman Period as a small building whose functions are not specified.

Both *μονόχωρον* or *μονόχωρος*, as well as *μονοικίδιον* have been defined as a house for one family.³⁰⁰ However, by the 2nd century AD the term indicates a single room which could be closed by a key, for instance in this letter:

μηκέτι λόγον ποιεῖσθαι περὶ τῆς κλειδὸς τῆς μονοχώρου. οὐ γὰρ θέλω ὑμᾶς τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς ἔνεκα ἐμοῦ ἢ ἄλλου διαφορὰν τινα ἔχειν.

I exhort you, brother, no longer to concern yourself with the key of the single room. For I do not want you, the brethren, on account of me or (l. 15) another to have any difference.³⁰¹

2) COURTYARD

Most small buildings are described as in a public courtyard, the αὐλή: the granary, θησαυρός, the farmer's building, ἔπαυλις, the agricultural storehouse, ἐποίκιον, the storehouse, κέλλα, and the house of the pastophores, παστοφόριον.³⁰² Some small buildings defined as οἶκοι, οἰκήματα, κέλλαι, κελλία, οἰκιδία, τόποι, could have been small buildings that may also have had a residential use.³⁰³ Such buildings were more frequently in the public courtyard than in the private courtyard, perhaps.³⁰⁴ However, there are some attestations of buildings in the αἶθριον. One of them is in a letter³⁰⁵ from the archive of the strategos Apollonios, a member of an upper class Greek-Egyptian family from Hermopolis. This letter is part of a group of correspondence between Apollonios and his wife Aline or his architect Herodes, which indicate that Apollonios wanted to build a large countryside estate in Hermopolis.³⁰⁶ In a letter of Apollonios to Herodes, the strategos explains to his architect that he wants a bedroom (*koiton*) built in the private courtyard.³⁰⁷ The only other attestation of a bedroom in the private courtyard is very late, dating to c. AD 657.³⁰⁸

In a 5th century papyrus,³⁰⁹ a woman called Didyme takes out a lease on three rooms: two are dining rooms and a further room has been translated as a μονόχωρον 'with all its finiments', with the claim that it was a room separated from the rest of the building and located in the private courtyard of the house.³¹⁰ The μονόχωρον also appears in another papyrus, but its location is more ambiguous.³¹¹

In another papyrus, the house described has an independent structure both in the private courtyard and on the flat roof of the house.³¹² The building in the courtyard is called a κελλίον, while the building on the roof is a καλύβη:

ἐν οἰκίᾳ ἀνεωγμένη εἰς λίβα ἐν τῷ αἰθρίῳ κελλίον ἐν ἀνεωγμένον εἰς βορρᾶ καὶ ἐν τῷ δώματι καλύβην ἀνεωγμένην εἰς λίβα μετὰ παντὸς αὐτῶν τοῦ δικαίου σὺν χρηστηρίων.

... in a house facing west, **in the [private] courtyard one small building facing north** and **on the flat roof a kiosk, facing west** with every right attaching to them and together with all appurtenances.³¹³

3) ON THE ROOF:

The roof (δῶμα) was used for several functions like eating³¹⁴ and praying.³¹⁵ However, there are also attestations of small buildings used as bedrooms on the roof (Figure 6.5).³¹⁶ The roof guaranteed more air without being exposed to the eyes of strangers: in fact, there are descriptions where it was surrounded by a protective fence. This measure was adopted by the strategos Apollonios in Hermopolis.³¹⁷ The terrace appears to be a place that can be locked away from the rest of the house judging by a 2nd century AD petition, in which a thief keeps some people imprisoned in the terrace.³¹⁸

In a contract from Tebtynis,³¹⁹ a mother sells two rooms to her son, and one of these is a bedroom situated on the third floor of the house:

You have satisfied my heart (with the) silver of the price of my half share of this room which is built which is equipped with beams and doors downstairs, together with my half share of the way of entrance and exit, together with my half share of this bedroom (in) the third story.³²⁰

This contract is particularly interesting because it is written both in Demotic and Greek and the two versions do not give the same description of the bedroom. In the Demotic version, quoted above in translation, the bedroom is ‘in the third story’ while the Greek version of the same document, says that the bedroom is ‘on the roof’:

... ἐπὶ τοῦ δώματος ἕτερον ἥμισυ μέρος κυτῶνος λεγομένου ἀδωρωτόν
... and on the roof another half share of a so-called bedroom, unplastered³²¹

Judging from the Demotic and Greek version, the bedroom seems to be a sort of semi-permanent small building, built on the roof. The Demotic version specifies that it was on the third floor, giving us important information about the height of the house. The Greek version specifies that it was unplastered, and built on the roof. The bilingual contract dates to the early Roman Period, but as I have shown, in the papyrus P. BGU I 305, 13–15, the tradition of building small kiosks or rooms on the top of the house continues well into the Byzantine Period, and can be compared with the tradition of roof kiosks in Yemenite tower-houses.

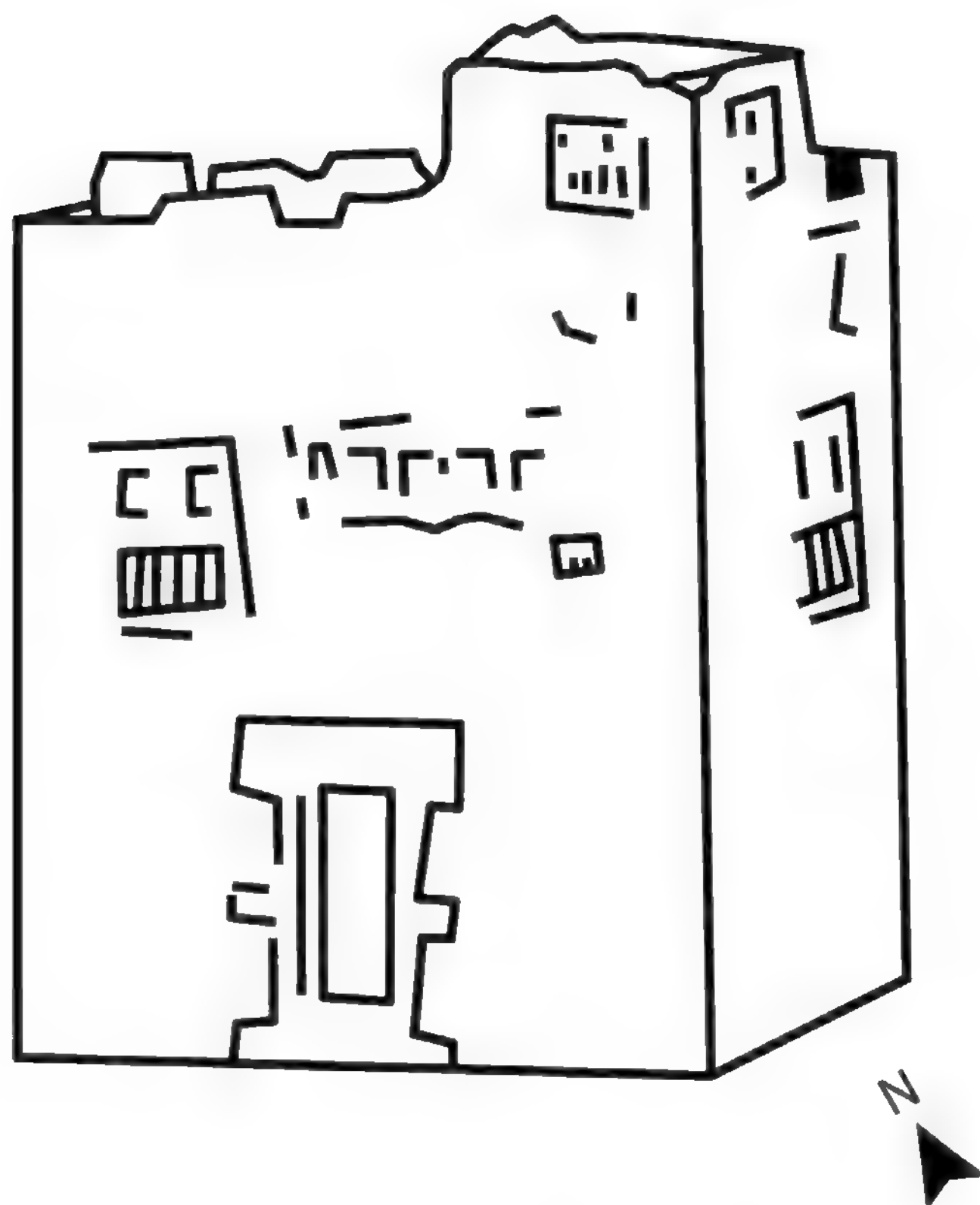


Figure 6.5 Reconstruction of a Greco-Roman Egyptian tower house model with a kiosk based on a terracotta tower model.

6.3.2.2 *Room in the house*

Another possible alternative to the pavilion, as a space occupied by women during childbirth and confinement, is that it was a room in the house. According to our modern way of living, we find it natural to think that the birthing room was the bedroom. However, it is important to focus on what the ancient sources say about this room and whether there are any explicit references to a bedroom. A papyrus from Late Dynastic Egypt suggests that the bedroom was not only a possible place for postpartum confinement, but it could also have been a place where women gave birth. The P. *Brooklyn* 47.218.2, dating to the 7th century BC, includes two spells to help childbirth, which mention the room of the parturient using two Egyptian terms, translated by Egyptologists as ‘bedchamber’:³²²

The first one (x+IV.7–8):

Spell for the protection of the bedchamber (*hnkt*) of the parturient (*t3 mst*) . . .

The second one (x+V.7–13):

Spell for the protection of the bedchamber (*t3 s.t sdr*) of the parturient . . .

The words used for the bedchamber are *hnkt* and *t3 s.t sdr*, but *sdr* also means lying down/being bedridden.³²³ The state of being bedridden could indicate a common ailment, but also the postpartum confinement which follows a difficult birth. In a letter, a certain Aurelius Syrus writes to his brother to let him know that his sister is still ‘laid up’ after having given birth.

Ἡραεῖς Ἀττινέου κβ εἰκάδι καὶ δευ<τέρα> μηνός τέτοκεν θῆλυ, πρὸς σήμερον κατὰκίται καὶ οὐ δύναμε ἐλθεῖν πρὸς Ἀματίαν.³²⁴

Herais daughter of Attineus on the 22nd, the twenty-second, gave birth to a daughter; until the present time she is laid up, and I cannot come to Amatia, so send Akoutas now at once.³²⁵

Considering this aspect of confinement, it is also worth considering the Demotic term for bedroom which is: *ꜥ.wy mn* or *st mn*. There are many possible meanings for *mn* but the Chicago Demotic Dictionary defines *mn* in this case as the verb ‘to remain’.³²⁶ It could thus be interpreted as the room that remains, the endurable room. However, as this word also means ‘landing place’, or ‘docks’, it sounds more like a room where one could remain and rest.

The bedroom was certainly chosen when problems with the pregnancy arose. A Ptolemaic petition by a man called Sabatteios reports that his pregnant wife had received blows from another woman and risked to have a miscarriage:

δεινῶς κακοπ[α]θεῖν καὶ κλινοπ[ετοῦς γεγο]νυίας κινδυνεύει [ὅ] ἔχει ἐγ(*) γ[α]στρὶ παιδίον ἔκ[τ]ρωμα γί[νεσ]θα[ι] μεταλλάξαν τ[ὸ]ν βίον.³²⁷

... she is suffering severely and having had to take to her bed her unborn child is in danger of dying and being miscarried.³²⁸

To conclude this discussion on the room used for childbirth, it is worth mentioning a fragment of Soranus, reported by the 13th century AD author Aurelianus. This describes the ideal conditions of the room where childbirth takes place:

The bed should also be low, so that the midwife can restrain the parturient. And it should be solidly located, lest it shake when the fetus is drawn down. And the place in which delivery takes place and where women rest after delivery should be of medium size. Indeed a small room makes people suffocate and a big one is not easily found warm. Besides, the air should be of moderate temperature; for cold air by its contrast has a somewhat astringent action; while heat greatly diminishes the strength of the parturient.³²⁹

This description gives us an idea as to what sort of room was likely to be chosen as a birthing room. The 'solidly located' bed confirms that the room used for delivery was a bedroom. The text also suggests that the same room is used for both delivery and rest after labour. It could be argued that Soranus is in fact describing two different beds, one for labour and one for resting after delivery, suggesting the possible use of two different rooms.³³⁰ However, it may be that the hard bed of labour was just a sort of litter that was easy to dismantle, perhaps similar to the female beds attested in Deir el-Medina.³³¹

Soranus' mention of the moderate size of the rooms suggests how unlikely it was that women gave birth in a tiny room under the stairs or in a vaulted cellar. Of course, Soranus is describing an ideal situation, only possible in those cases where the size of the house allowed the parturient to have her own room. At the same time, the bed itself was an expensive commodity that could not be afforded by everyone.

In the previous section, I showed that bedrooms were often located on the upper floor.³³² The reason for this is the same as why a kiosk was situated on the terrace roof: to spend time and sleep in a fresh place. Herodotus claims that the Egyptians preferred to sleep upstairs because it was less hot and there were fewer flies.³³³ In addition, Arnold's study on the management of waste in houses in Elephantine shows that the upper floors were much cleaner than the ground floors.³³⁴ Therefore, if we factor in Soranus' views as well, an upstairs bedroom would seem the ideal choice for childbirth.

Soranus suggests that a room upstairs was certainly used for labour, even if he does not claim that this was the case everywhere. He also mentions the location of the birthing room when he describes the position of the midwife:

But to make her [the midwife] kneel [in front of the parturient], as some have deemed good, renders it both difficult to work and undignified; and the same is true of having her stand, as Heron required, in a pit so that her hands might not work from above, for this is not only awkward but also impossible in second-floor rooms.³³⁵

The upper storey was the most private area of the house, which was ideal for a mother in labour. Of course, houses with only one storey did not have upper floors for private spaces, so had to divide private and public space according to their plan. The houses with more than one storey could choose to use their domestic spaces differently, according to the seasons, as happens today in the towers in Yemen; the inhabitants occupy the largest and most airy rooms in the summer, while they prefer smaller rooms in the winter because they are warmer. In Egypt winters are not cold, but wherever space was sufficient there might have been a change of bedroom. Not by chance, bedrooms are also attested on the ground floor at times.³³⁶

6.4 Preliminary conclusions

The archaeological evidence only allows us to directly observe rooms on the ground floor and those underground; the upstairs rooms are never preserved. However, if we integrate the missing information about the pavilion and the rooms of the upper floors from the papyrological and literary sources, it is possible to speculate about which areas of the house were used by women during childbirth and menstruation. The room beneath the stairs could have been used as a latrine where women could wash, but it is unlikely that it was used for an extended period of time. Childbirth certainly occurred in a private area of the house; this place was more likely to be upstairs or in a protected area on the ground floor. It is also likely that the position of the bedroom varied according to the season. In summer, the bedroom could have been within an airy pavilion (on the garden, on the roof, or in the courtyard), in a kiosk on the roof, or in a room in the upper storey. In winter, another room could have been used as a bedroom on a lower floor, or on the ground floor.

Notes

- 1 For a discussion of elite groups in the context of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt see Introduction, section 2.
- 2 At the end of the 19th century Flinders Petrie excavated many sites in Egypt and in the same period, a group of papyrologists, Grenfell, Hunt and Hogarth, funded by the Egypt Exploration Fund, excavated sixteen sites in the Fayyum. The translation of papyri found in these Egyptian towns and villages made a fundamental contribution to the reconstruction of their history. Grenfell, Hunt, and Hogarth 1900. Davoli 2012: 156–157.
- 3 Boak and Peterson 1932. Excavated in 1924–1928.
- 4 Boak 1935. Excavated in 1931–1932.
- 5 Davoli 2012: 155.
- 6 Luckhard 1914.
- 7 Nowicka's dissertation is still valid and useful today, even if it has to be integrated with new data derived from more recent archaeological projects, as well as information from newly discovered papyri. Nowicka 1969.
- 8 Maehler studied both the papyri and archaeological evidence from the Roman Period. Maehler 1983: 119–137.
- 9 In her book *Oikia*, Husson used attestations of houses in Greek papyri to reconstruct

- the function of rooms and annexes in Greco-Roman Egypt. Her study is very accurate and covers a wide chronological span, from the Ptolemaic to the Byzantine Period. Husson 1983.
- 10 Shaw 1992: 267–299.
 - 11 Kemp 1984; 1986; 1987; 1989; Kemp and Stevens 2010.
 - 12 Meskell 1998; 2002.
 - 13 Nevett 2001: 22.
 - 14 Nevett 2001: 17.
 - 15 Walker 1983.
 - 16 From Nowicka onwards, archaeologists and papyrologists have published high quality publications on housing, but have rarely worked together. For instance, the papyrologist Rowlandson (1998) in her sourcebook of mainly Greek papyri concerning women, addressed questions about the presence of women in the house. However, the archaeological evidence she used was not up-to-date. Several new archaeological reports present an interpretative approach though, like those of Davoli (1998, 2010, 2010b, 2012) on the Greco-Roman village of Bakchias in the Fayyum; as well as the study of tower-houses edited and co-authored by Marchi (2014), and the recent reports on Tebtynis by Hadji-Minaglou (2007 and 2008: 123–133). I agree with Davoli (2012) that the best reports are those that combine ‘archaeology, papyrology and archival research’, in order to improve ‘the knowledge of settlements’.
 - 17 Bowen, Chandler and Martin 2006: 51–64.
 - 18 Its aim is well summarised by Cuyler 2012: ‘... social and cultural patterns are imprinted on spatial layouts, and ... spatial layouts can enforce social and cultural patterns ... Space Syntax ... is useful for archaeologists because it provides interpretive models for the spatial configurations we encounter in ancient buildings and cities.’
 - 19 Laurence 2007. First edition in 1994.
 - 20 Stöger 2011.
 - 21 Correas-Amador’s doctoral thesis is an interesting first attempt to compare the mud brick architecture of Dynastic Egypt with modern vernacular mud brick architecture in Egypt, integrating a typological study with an anthropological one, looking at how modern Egyptian people inhabit mudbrick houses. Her study is very inspiring for me here because she finds striking similarities between Dynastic Egyptian and modern Egyptian houses, implicitly including Greco-Roman, Byzantine and medieval architectural phases in a discourse of continuity from the Dynastic Period up to the present time. Correas-Amador 2013.
 - 22 The archaeologist Lehmann (2010) compared Greco-Roman Egyptian tower-houses with late medieval and modern tower-houses in Yemen.
 - 23 *Between Words and Walls: Material and Textual Approaches to Housing in the Greco-Roman World*, 29–30 August 2013, Birkbeck University of London. *Household Studies in Complex Societies, (Micro) Archaeological and Textual Approaches*, 15–16 March 2013, The Oriental Institute, University of Chicago. Cf. Müller 2015.
 - 24 Anna Boozer commented in her recent article that: ‘the neglect of these houses is unfortunate since ... Egypt offers some of the best-preserved Roman houses available to us. Indeed, Egyptian domestic contexts from all periods have often been left by the wayside in favour of mortuary and religious contexts.’ Boozer 2010: 143–144.
 - 25 Cf. the interview with modern Egyptian inhabitants of mudbrick houses in Correas-Amador 2013: 355.
 - 26 Davoli 1998: 356.
 - 27 Nowicka 1969; Davoli 2012: 166–167.
 - 28 For a detailed description of all the kinds of wood used in Egypt in the Dynastic and Greco-Roman Period, see Gale, Gasson, Hepper and Killen 2009: 334–371.
 - 29 Davoli 2012: 166.

- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Nowicka 1969: 62–65. Davoli 1998: 86.
- 32 Nowicka 1969: 65.
- 33 Davoli 1998: 86.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Nowicka 1969: 100–103.
- 36 See, for instance, the lock in room C in house VIII in Bakchias: Nifosì 2009: 54–55.
- 37 Correas-Amador 2013: 125, 138.
- 38 Husson 1983: 127. Καμάρα means: ‘vaulted room’. Normally described as a storage room, only in one case is it explicitly mentioned as part of the house: P. Oxy. IV 729, 34: ‘two vaulted rooms’. The second term is common especially during the Roman and Byzantine Periods. Some were vaulted, and seem to occur more often in urban houses than in the countryside.
- 39 Phases of houses in Karanis: A period AD 350–450; B period AD 250–350; C period from the early 2nd to the middle of the 3rd century. Late C period or early B period are difficult to distinguish. D and E date from the Ptolemaic period to the early Roman era. Boak and Peterson 1932: 39; Husselman and Peterson 1979: 9.
- 40 Husselman and Peterson 1979: 67–68, plans 25–26.
- 41 Husselman and Peterson 1979: 69–70, plans 31–37.
- 42 Nowicka 1969: 105–107.
- 43 Pernigotti 2004: 67–68.
- 44 Cf. P. BM 10750 (Philadelphia, 231 BC).
- 45 Luckhard 1914: 24.
- 46 Soknopaiou Nesos III 301 (Nowicka 1969: fig. 68) and IV 401 (fig. 69); House 2 in Medinet Ghoran (fig. 71).
- 47 Husson 1983: 249–264.
- 48 P. Tebt. III 834.
- 49 Nowicka 1969: fig. 72; Cf. BGU VII pl. II B.
- 50 Both mentioned in P. Oxy. II 247.23–25 (AD 90). Husson 1983: 29–30. Husson claims that the term αἶθριον does not derive from the Latin *atrium* but from the Greek adjective αἶθριος, ‘bright’, because it provided light to the house. Husson also mentions an attestation of the αἶθριον in a Ptolemaic papyrus: P. Cairo Zen. 59764.39 (Philadelphia [Arsinoites], 255–254 BC).
- 51 For instance P. Oxy. III 482. Husson 1983: 47.
- 52 Husson 1983: 45.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Davoli 1998: 355–358.
- 55 BGU IV 1037 (Karanis, 47 BC); Husson 1984: 173.
- 56 Lehmann 2013: 8.
- 57 Marchi 2014.
- 58 Davies 1929: 248–249, fig. 12. The model house of Amenemhet, mayor and superintendent of priests in the 12th Dynasty in Hermopolis.
- 59 UC14543.
- 60 In particular the well preserved tower-house built in the NK mortuary temple of Ramesses III in Medinet Habu. Hölscher 1941.
- 61 Lehmann 2013: 1–2. Marouard 2014: 105–133 in Marchi 2014.
- 62 Grimal 1931: 43–46.
- 63 The Greeks in Egypt used the terms μαγδῶλ, μάγδωλος and πύργομαγδῶλ for the guarding tower. Husson 1983: 251, note 1. Cf. LSJ, μάγδωλος, BGU VII 1550.2 (Philadelphia, 3rd BC); P. Fay. 38.5 (Euhemeria, 2nd–3rd century AD); μαγδῶλ, P. Fam. Tebt. 23.8 (Tebtynis, AD 123); πύργομαγδῶλ, BGU I 282.13 (Arsinoites, 175–180 BC); BGU II 542.6 (Athenas Kome, 2nd century BC).
- 64 Bakchias I: 53.

- 65 Husson 1983: 251–252; Nowicka 1973: 175–178.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 See P. *Oxy.* I 104.25 ff.; P. *Lond.* III 978 (pp. 232–236). Grimal 1931: 44. Husson 1983: 243–247.
- 68 Nowicka 1969: 139.
- 69 Nowicka 1969: fig. 84.
- 70 Nowicka 1969: 131–134. Marouard 2015: fig. 8.
- 71 Nowicka 1969: 139.
- 72 Nowicka 1969: 20. She also provides a very extensive bibliography in note 58.
- 73 Van Minnen 1994.
- 74 Boak and Peterson 1932: 63; plan VI, section F10.
- 75 This is clear when we consider how many different names British people use to name the toilet, and how this term varies according to history, geographic area and social class.
- 76 Nowicka 1969: 18–19. Lehmann 2013: fig. 28. Marchi 2014.
- 77 Budapest Art Museum, inv.T591. Nowicka 1969: fig.83.
- 78 Nowicka claims that the provenance and date are still not clear, but it seems that the artist could have lived around the end of the 2nd century BC. Nowicka 1969: 20.
- 79 See 3.3.
- 80 Husson 1983: 86–87.
- 81 Nevett 2001: 38, writes: ‘the hearth often represented the house as a whole (Euripides, *Andromache* 593), not only because this is seen as the centre of the house in physical terms, but also because of other associations which perhaps stem from the importance of fire itself as an element for warming, lighting and cooking. The hearth has religious implications in Aeschylus (*Seven against Thebes* 275) and is associated with the sun (Aristotle, *Frag. Var.* 5.203). It also features as a place of supplication, not only in Homer (*Odyssey* 6.305–312), but also at a later date in Andocides (*On the Mysteries* 44.2).’
- 82 P. *Lips.* 41. Husson 1983: 87.
- 83 6.7.2.
- 84 6.7.4.
- 85 I am now considering non-vernacular houses because vernacular architecture has more complex patterns of division of domestic space according to gender, age and social roles. Oliver 2003; Cassiman 2006. For modern and ancient categories of gendered division of domestic space, and how we perceive them, see Spencer-Wood 2002: 162–189. Brumfiel 2006: 31–58.
- 86 Nevett 2001: 30–31.
- 87 But Islamic cultures sometimes segregate women and sometimes just divide domestic space into men’s and women’s areas. Cf. stories from modern Yemen: Damlūji 2007: 98 shows that a political change can bring about tighter controls on women, and therefore a move towards segregation.
- 88 See Nevett 2001 and Koltsida 2007:121–127.
- 89 Blundell 1995:137–138.
- 90 Plin. *Nat.* 4.13; Alex. ab Alex. *GD* 1.3.2, Tertull. *Ap.* 6.4.
- 91 Nevett 2001: 17.
- 92 In particular, Meskell, Koltsida and Kleinke looked for a gendered division in NK Egyptian houses, while Lisa Nevett focused on ancient Greek houses. Meskell 1998; Koltsida 2007; Kleinke 2007.
- 93 Kleinke 2007: 75; Koltsida 2007: 43. Cf. Meskell 1998: 221–226, 229–231 and Weiss 2009: 193–208.
- 94 Koltsida (2007: 127) describes an image of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. Toivari-Viitala 2001 reports more evidence concerning spouses sleeping in the same room in the NK: O. Gardiner 363, a spell against night terrors, and a literary reference from the *Admonitions* (4, 9–10).




- 95 However, the Ancient Egyptian use of bedrooms can be seen in a new light by taking into account what has emerged from Correias-Amador's recent research on how modern, modest mudbrick village houses in Egypt are used. Amador interviewed a large number of inhabitants of these houses in order to find out the relationship between the public and private spaces in them, and in particular the use of the bedroom. Most of the people interviewed considered the bedroom as a room principally for sleeping, even in the most modest houses. Some people also specified that visitors were not welcome in the most private parts used as bedrooms. Correias-Amador 2013: 121 and, for the interviews, see answers to question 19 in *ibid.*, Appendix, document 9. The idea of a bedroom as a private space does not seem to change according to gender or age: old women living alone, as well as young couples saw their bedrooms in the same way.
- 96 Quoted by Nevett 2001: 17–19.
- 97 *X.Oec.* 6.5. Tr. by Dakyns 1897.
- 98 *Lys.* 1.9. Tr. by Lamb 1930.
- 99 Nevett 2001: 19 and 173–175.
- 100 See, for instance, *P. Strassb.* dem. 1.
- 101 Boak and Peterson 1932: 66–67. Husselman and Peterson 1979: C54 map 12 and B118 map 16.
- 102 Other alterations which indicate a change in the way houses were inhabited in Karanis, are discussed by Nevett 2011: 25–26.
- 103 Cf. *BGU* VI 1273.10–15 (Oxyrhynchites, 221 BC) = *Sel. Pap.* I, no. 65 commented on this section.
- 104 Husson 1983: 39–40.
- 105 *Ibid.*
- 106 See for instance: Rowlandson 1998: 316. *P. Mich.* V 253; R185, a Demotic contract from Tebtynis: sale of two rooms by a mother to her son. It is interesting to note here that the bedroom is on the third storey of the building and is defined as 'unplastered': Rowlandson 1998: 252–253. Cf. the story of Setna Khaemwese in R288: the protagonist Tabubu has her bedroom on the upper storey.
- 107 Husson 1983: 152.
- 108 *P. Cairo Zen.* IV 59782 a; *SB* VI 9153; *P. Baden* 30; *P. Ross. Georg.* 3.56. In *SB* VI 8988 and *SB* VI 9586 the *koiton* is placed on the upper floor of the house.
- 109 *P. Mich.* V 253.
- 110 *P. Lond.* 1023.
- 111 *P. Giss.* 67.
- 112 The function of these semicircular annexes to other rooms is shown in Rowlandson 1998: 246; Husson 1983: 73–77 for a complete range of meanings for this word.
- 113 Grenfell, Hunt and Hogarth 1900: 59 and plate XVI.
- 114 The words often used for bed and bed fittings in Greek papyri can be found in a private letter from Karanis: bed, pillow and the filling for the pillow are defined respectively as: κλίνη, προσκεφάλαια, τὰ πλήσζματα. *SB* VI 9636.19–20 (Karanis, AD 135). Elsewhere, the mattress is called στρωμα [P. *Col.* III 15.5 (Philadelphia, 257 BC)] or στρωμάτιον [P. *Cair. Zen.* II 59241, 3 (Philadelphia, 253 BC)]. Noticeably, in the latter papyrus, Zenon orders, for a certain Peisikles, a mattress which has to be 'at least long enough for a seat for two and to have a double front'. This could suggest that the στρωμάτιον was ordered for Peisikles' bridal chamber. In another papyrus a wealthy woman requires from her brother a set of expensive bedspreads and a sleeping rug for the child [*BGU* IV 1204.10–11 (Busiris, 28 BC)]. In a Latin private letter of a Roman soldier, the mattress is called *culcita* and the pillow *pulvinus*. *P. Mich.* VIII 468.10–12. (Alexandria, AD 100–125).
- 115 Cribiore 2001a: 224. The history of this family, culturally very Hellenised, and belonging to the upper class, can be reconstructed thanks to the discovery of Apollonios' archive of letters. Cribiore 2001a: 223–239.

- 116 P. *Giss.* 67.15–16 also reports that, in the room in the tower, some logs of wood had been stored, as ordered by Aline.
- 117 Wilcken 1936: 48. Husson 1983: 154.
- 118 *SB* VI 9153.20–21 (Herakleopolis, AD 596).
- 119 Husson 1983: 154.
- 120 Ibid.
- 121 P. *Lond.* III 964.19–21 (unknown provenance, late 2nd century AD).
- 122 British Library manuscript #17,202. Kraemer 1998.
- 123 Tr. by Cook 1984: chapter 2. Full passage available here: <http://markgoodacre.org/aseneth/translate.htm>.
- 124 See *supra*.
- 125 On the verso of the Hieratic papyrus p.Harris 500 (= BM EA 10060). Lichtheim 1976: 200–203.
- 126 This tale could suggest that the tower was in use in Egypt during the Dynastic Period. However, the story reports that the daughter of the Chief lived in the country of ‘Nahrin’, which is identified by Lichtheim as the country of Mitanni, on the upper Euphrates: Lichtheim 1976: 203, note 2.
- 127 Tr. Lichtheim 1976: 200–203.
- 128 *BGU* VI 1273.10–15 (Oxyrhynchites, 221 BC) = *Sel. Pap.* I, n. 65; Kushnik 1988: 166. Nowicka 1969: note 95.
- 129 Literally, ‘the ones with her’.
- 130 Tr. by R183.
- 131 P. *Oxy* 1 104.25–27 (Oxyrhynchos, AD 96). In this case, the word used for tower is not *pyrgos* but *pylon*: Husson 1983: 246.
- 132 See, for instance, the will of lady Naunakhte, who lived in Deir el-Medina in the NK: Ashmolean 1945.95 and 1945.97; c. 1150 BC. Cf. Černý 1945: 29–53.
- 133 Marchi 2014. Also see Lehmann 2013 and Abdelwahed 2016.
- 134 Lehmann 2013: 3.
- 135 Lehmann 2013: 7.
- 136 Ibid.
- 137 Lehmann 2013: 11, figs 15 and 16.
- 138 Lehmann 2013: fig. 28.
- 139 Damlūji 2007: 98.
- 140 Seen at the Mut Ethnographic Museum in Dakhla, a medieval house transformed into a museum.
- 141 May and Reid 2010: 76–77.
- 142 Chapter 5.3.
- 143 A similar *hlyβ.t* also appears in a papyrus from the British Museum, even if the room is not associated with any particular practice: P. *BM* 10446, 2 and 4. Also published as P. *BM* Andrews 25.
- 144 P. *Strassb. Dem* 1.1; P. *Louvre* 2431.4. Cfr. *Xrr(.t)* and its variations in *CDD h*: 70–71.
- 145 P. *Louvre* 2424.2.
- 146 P. *Louvre* 2443.4.
- 147 Colin 2001.
- 148 Ibid.
- 149 Colin 2001: 263.
- 150 My translation.
- 151 LSJ, Dsc.2.75.
- 152 LSJ, Gal.14.208.
- 153 LXX, Lev. 15:19, 20, 25.
- 154 Colin 2001: 263.
- 155 LSJ, Hp. *Aph.* 5.28, Arist. *PA* 648a31; LXX Ge.18.11. But also meaning *lochia* in Gal. 17(2).817.

- 156 Bingen 1993: 219–228.
- 157 Used in the sacred law of Ptolemais. Colin 2001: 263. Cf. LSJ, Hp. *Aph.* 3.28, Arist. *GA* 727a18, Plot. 2.9.12; καταμήνιον, τό, Arist. *HA* 573a16; Gal. 8.423; Speus. ap. Alex. *Aphr.* in *Metaph.* 699.31.
- 158 Colin 2001: 265 and note 27–28. Husson 1983: 276.
- 159 *P. Lond.* II 154.5–7 (AD 68).
- 160 It could be interpreted as a room of the house in *P. Oxy.* VIII 1129.10 (5th century AD), *P. Oxy.* III 502.34 (2nd century AD), *P. Oxy.* VI 912.13 (3rd century AD).
- 161 Montserrat 1996: 47–48; Colin 2001: 259–268; Husson 1983: 226–230; Wilfong 1999: 429–430.
- 162 Husson 1990: 123–137.
- 163 Ibid.
- 164 B3.10 Kraeling 1938: 9; B43 in Porten 1996: 237–238.
- 165 Tr. by Porten 1996: 237–238.
- 166 Porten 1996: 98.
- 167 Horbury and Davies 1984: 383.
- 168 Analysed by Husson, Porten and Colin: Husson 1983: 229. *P. Lond.* V 1722.20; *P. Monac.* 11.27. *P. Monac.* 12.22. Cfr. Porten 1996: *P. Lond.* V 1722 = D22; *P. Monac.* 11.27 = *P. Münch.* 11.27 = D45; Porten 1996: D22, D45, D46; Colin 2001: 264.
- 169 Husson 1983: 226–230. LSJ, 1891.
- 170 *CDD h*: 70; Porten 1996: D45, D46, note 6.
- 171 *P. Münch.* 11, lines 25–30.
- 172 Tr. by Porten 1996: D45. See also *tchere* in D46 (= *P. Münch.* 12).
- 173 Colin 2001: 264.
- 174 Wilfong 2002: 49 and 77.
- 175 *P. KRU* 35, 26–38. Tr. by Wilfong 2002: 49.
- 176 *P. KRU* 35, 26, Coptic transcription in Crum, Steindorff and Schiller 1912: n. 35, line 26.
- 177 Crum 1939: 107b. Crum also specifies (107–108) that in other Coptic documents the room under the stairs is called **ΚΑΛΑΧΤΩΡΤ/ΚΑΛΑΧΤΟΡΤ**.
- 178 See for example, Husselman and Peterson 1979: 73; house C57 for the jar, and C(5033) plate 38 for a storage niche. Correas-Amador 2013: 92, describes a 20th century feature of some staircases in Lower Egyptian mudbrick houses: ‘the gap underneath the stairs was used as a cupboard or small storage room, which could be left open . . . or closed by a small wooden door. Equally, an oven could also be carved into the side of the staircase.’
- 179 House VIII dated from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD. Bakchias II: 12, fig. 2; 60 fig. 49.
- 180 House II 201. Boak 1935: 12–13, Plate IX.
- 181 House 1100, dating to the end of the 1st century AD. Three floors. Tebtynis I, fig. 24. Hadji-Minaglou 2008: 124. House 3000 II, dating to the Hellenistic Period but still in use in the 1st century AD. Two floors. Tebtynis I, fig. 32. Hadji-Minaglou 2008: 125. In Tebtynis, both houses 1100 and 3000 II had four flights of stairs. Under the second and third flight of stairs of house 1100, and under the second, third and fourth flights of stairs of 3100 II, there is a room accessible through a trap door on the landing of the third floor. Tebtynis IV: fig. 93.
- 182 Bakchias II: 12, fig. 2; 60 fig. 49.
- 183 Room N is under the first ramp of stairs.
- 184 Bakchias III: 58. Its filling with sand and pottery shows that it was no longer used in a later phase of the house.
- 185 Boak 1935: 12–13. Tower-house II 201. Boak 1935: section A-B (plan XI). Section A-B (West to East looking north) shows the ramp of stairs around a central pillar. On the first landing of the stairs there is a trap door leading to a room underneath, plan XI.

- 186 Boak 1935: 13.
- 187 Bakchias III: 58. This room had the same fill of sand and pottery type as room VIII N, showing that the two rooms under the stairs were abandoned in the same period. However the exact date when rooms O and N might have been abandoned is not specified in the report.
- 188 Ibid.
- 189 P. *Louvre* 2443, line 4 (= Zauzich 1968: Urkunde 14, 21ff.); Papyrus Louvre 2424, line 2 (= Zauzich 1968: Urkunde 11, 17 ff.). See Chapter 5.2.
- 190 See above for the discussion of the meaning of the ‘*peras*-sized’ room. B3.10 Kraeling 1938: 9; B43 in Porten 1996: 237–238.
- 191 Sayed 1987.
- 192 Yeomans 2006: 231.
- 193 Angelakis and Rose 2014: 262: ‘Of the single domestic latrines observed in Ostia, five are situated under staircases (*subscalaria*) (I.VI.1; I.VII.1; I.XI.2; I.XII.2; I.XII.3). The seats are made of white marble, as are the walls, and the pavement. The latrines date to the 2nd century AD.’
- 194 Sor. 13.82.
- 195 Sor. 2.31.100.
- 196 Lys. 1.9.
- 197 *Wb.* I, 39.24.
- 198 *CDD s*: 9–10.
- 199 *CDD s*: 10. In particular HD *s.t-ywn(.t)* as ὑπὲρ βαλανείων = βαλανικόν, βαλανείου (τέλεσμα).
- 200 P. *Flor.* II 127.4–6 (Theadelphia, AD 266). P. *Lond.* I 131, col 1.388–389; 433; 509; 613 (Hermopolites, AD 79).
- 201 Nowicka 1969: 141. Husson (1983: 160) agrees on the distinction between βαλανεῖον and λουτρών based on the fact that in a papyrus from the archive of Zenon (*PSI* V 547) the two terms appear in the description of the same house. Other attestations of the βαλανεῖον as a warm bathroom are in P. *Flor.* II 127.4–6; P. *Lond.* I 131: R. 388–389; 433; 509; 613.
- 202 *BGU* IV 1116 (Alexandria, 13 BC). Husson 1983: 154–155.
- 203 λάσανον in Hp. *Superf.* 8.1–2, 76. λάσανα in Hp. *Fist.* 9.2, 13 143. Hanson 1994: 162–168, figs 1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, 3. For a detailed study of the Greek chamber pot, see Lynch and Papadopoulos 2006: 1–32.
- 204 Luckhard 1914: 96. Husson 1986: in particular 91.
- 205 Turin Egyptian Museum, inv. S. 08513 RCGE 19373. 31 × 45.5 × 56 cm. Tomb of Kha TT8 (NK, 18th Dynasty).
- 206 Sasson 1995: 367. Vassilika 2010: 100–102.
- 207 Limestone toilet seat from Amarna (XVIII Dynasty). Cairo Museum Room 34, Case O. Photo: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egyptian_Toilet_Seat_\(el-Amarna\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egyptian_Toilet_Seat_(el-Amarna).jpg).
- 208 Borchardt 1916: 510–558 and in particular figs 43–47.
- 209 Kemp and Stevens 2010: 501.
- 210 Her. 2.35.4. It is not certain whether Herodotus visited Egypt, but if he did, he travelled around the mid 5th century BC, which, in Egyptian chronology, corresponds to the last century of the Late Dynastic Period.
- 211 Lloyd (1994: 150) argues that Herodotus is making a comparison with 5th century Greek houses, which do not seem to have privies. Unfortunately the evidence from Greek houses is too scarce to verify Herodotus’ comparison.
- 212 *Wb.* I, 167.9; *Wb.* I, 417; *Wb.* III, 163.7, respectively.
- 213 In particular, P. Ashmolean Museum 1945.95. See translations and discussion in Černý 1945: 29–53.
- 214 Griffith 1916: 195. Line 1, *recto*. Toivari-Viitala 2001: 109 and note 93.

224 *Childbirth, menstruation and domestic space*

- 215 Husson 1983: 60.
- 216 ‘λουτροῖς καὶ περιρραντηρίοις’ Philo Alex., *Spec. Leg.* III. 63. ‘καθαροῖς καὶ λουτροῖς’, Philo Alex., *Fug.* 153.
- 217 *Wb.* III, 163.7.
- 218 *CDD h*: 276.
- 219 P. *Louvre* 2443, line 4 (= Zauzich 1968: Urkunde 14, 21ff.).
- 220 P. *Louvre* 2431, line 4. Cfr. *hrr(.t)* and its variations in *CDD h*: 70–71.
- 221 P. *Louvre* 2424, line 2.
- 222 *CDD h*: 71.
- 223 Sayed 1987: 460 (glossary).
- 224 Uncertain attribution, which deserves a further study of possible Coptic antecedents.
- 225 Correias-Amador 2013: 112.
- 226 Mk 7:19.
- 227 Mt. 15:17.
- 228 Δημόσιοι ἀφεδρώνες. *OGIS* 483.220; note 79. Roman, early Imperial Period by *ibid.*: 92 notes 1–2.
- 229 Pauly, Kroll, Wissowa, and Ziegler 1913: Vol. 16, cols. 1317–1322.
- 230 Hsch. 8584. Cf. LSJ ἀφεδρεύω.
- 231 While the δημόσιος ἀφεδρών mentioned in the law from Pergamon indicated communal latrines with seats, often attested in the Greek world. Cf. Antoniou 2010: 67–85, fig. 4.9ff.
- 232 *BGU* IV 1116 (Alexandria, 13 BC).
- 233 Hsch. 8585. ἄφεδρος as ἀκαθαρσία. Cf. Leviticus 15:19.
- 234 Eaton 2005: 29–32.
- 235 Brunner-Traut 1955: 11–30. Lesko 2008: 197–209.
- 236 Bruyère 1939.
- 237 See Chapter 5.3.
- 238 Brunner-Traut 1955: 11–30.
- 239 See, for example, the scene of Nefertiti and Akhenaton with daughters and servants under the pavilion, in Davies and Martin 1905, plate XXXII. Another similar scene is the Assyrian relief of the ‘Garden Party’ from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh, c. 645 BC. British Museum ME 124920.
- 240 Cf. the audience tent of Alexander: Ath. *Deipn.* 12.538b–539a–f (Chares, *FGrH* 125 F 4; Phylarchus, *FGrH* 81 F 41). Communication by Prof. D. Thompson.
- 241 Fischer 1976: 7, fig. 4d and note 45.
- 242 Feucht 2004:46.
- 243 <http://research.uni-leipzig.de/digiheka/pLeiden348-33.html>.
- 244 Borghouts 1971: 30.
- 245 *Wb.* I 78. In other sources, the pavilion is also called *j3m.w*   . *Wb.* I 81.1–7; Lesko, *Dictionary* 2 I, 33. *LÄ* VI 1282–1284.
- 246 Eaton 2005: 29–32.
- 247 Brunner-Traut 1955: 11–30.
- 248 Pinch 1983: 405–414. Backhouse 2011: 25–39.
- 249 Bruyère 1939. Kemp 1979: 47–53. Pinch 1993 and 1994.
- 250 Erman 1901: 11 (B, I, 8–9), text, transl. and comment.
- 251 Eaton 2005: 29.
- 252 Riddles, secrets: *Wb.* I, 146.2–3; Lesko, *Dictionary* 2 I, 60. Ashes: *Wb.* I, 146.6; *MedWb* 109.
- 253 Eaton 2005: 30. She derived this interpretation from Gardiner’s sign list where O4 is a reed shelter in fields. The term *h* is translated by the *Wörterbuch* exclusively as a courtyard. *Wb.* II, 470.1–5; *FCD* 156; Lesko, *Dictionary* 2 II, 76. However, Eaton argues that the structure could indeed be built within the courtyard (rather than the fields mentioned by Gardiner) to give a private space to mothers and newborn children.

- 254 Ebers 98.9.
- 255 Eaton 2005: 31.
- 256 Ebers 78, 14; 25, 16.
- 257 Eaton 2005: 31.
- 258 Strassmann 1996: 304–315.
- 259 Cassiman 2006.
- 260 Wasserfall 1999.
- 261 Martin 1989: pl. 68.
- 262 Arnold 1996: 100 and notes 108–109.
- 263 The ostraca were found in different parts of the village and ‘can be dated to the Nineteenth Dynasty, although it is also possible to attribute them to the Twentieth Dynasty as objects dating to the reigns of Ramesses III and Ramesses IV have been found in the same contexts’. Backhouse 2011: 27.
- 264 Dasen 1993, fig. 6.
- 265 Brunner-Traut 1955: 12–15, fig. 1 Berlin 21 453; fig. 2 VA 2339; fig. 3, Brussel E 6 382; fig. 4, BM 8506; fig. 5. Reconstruction of painting by Bruyère (*FIFAO*, 16, 3 and *BIFAO* 22 1923). Also based on the figured ostraca published by Vandier D’Abbadie 1936, 1937, 1946, 1959 (here indicated as VA).
- 266 267 Brunner-Traut 1955: 16, fig. 6. This scene from Leiden has been given a strong erotic connotation because of the monkey and the nudity of the girl. However, the tattoo of the god Bes also shows a link to fertility and childbirth.
- 268 Backhouse 2011. Based on the ostraca carrying pictorial decoration published by Vandier D’Abbadie, on the ostraca from the Gayer Anderson collection, preserved at the Medelhavsmuseet in Stockholm, published by Peterson 1974 and others. Backhouse divided the ostraca into two groups: 1) Women in bed: group of twenty-nine ostraca; twenty-one are from Deir el-Medina, of which eighteen were found by Bruyère and three by Möller. An additional piece is known to have come from the Theban necropolis and is now in the Louvre (Keimer 1940: 45, 4).
- 269 VA2337–38.
- 270 VA2339.
- 271 VA2342.
- 272 VA2342.
- 273 Bruyère 1922: 3787.
- 274 VA2335.
- 275 Backhouse 2011: 7.
- 276 Ibid., fig. 4.
- 277 Pinch 1983: 405–414; Backhouse 2013: 22–40.
- 278 The most updated literary review of wall paintings from houses at Deir el-Medina with ‘pavilion scenes’ can be found in Backhouse 2011: 30–34: 1) House S. E. VIII: painting of a female dancer (Fig. 7; Bruyère 1939: 273; Vandier D’Abbadie 1938: 27). Like the pavilion scenes on the ostraca, the woman is naked except for a veil or a cape. Bes is tattooed on her thighs. 2) House S. E. I (fig. 8; Bruyère 1922: 122): details from a group scene of which are still visible: ‘four pairs of feet, two papyriform columns and a stool. Although incomplete, the image does suggest a seated figure on a stool, attended by servants, surrounded by convolvulus leaves, and consequently similar to the pavilion scenes on the ostraca’. Bruyère (1922, 132) reconstructed the seated figure as Hathor breastfeeding her son Horus, and added cow horns and a sun disk. Backhouse (and I) agree with Brunner-Traut’s reconstruction (1955, fig. 5) showing a breastfeeding woman wearing a tripartite wig. 3) House C. V. II (Backhouse 2011: 35; Bruyère 1939: 59): half figure of a woman at her toilet, probably assisted by a slave.
- 279 Bruyère 1939: 61.
- 280 Bruyère 1939: 56–57.

- 281 Bruyère 1939: 137.
- 282 Koltsida 2006: 165–174.
- 283 Romano 1990: 26–27.
- 284 Koltsida 2006: 165–174; Weiss 2009: 193–208.
- 285 Ikram 1989: 89–101.
- 286 Kemp 1979, 52–53.
- 287 See Chapter 2.
- 288 *CDD k*: 5–6.
- 289 Husson 1983: 147.
- 290 *P. Cairo* 30646. Dates to the Ptolemaic Period. Lichtheim 2006: 125.
- 291 Griffith 1900: 127.
- 292 Lichtheim 2006: 134.
- 293 Rowlandson 1998: 363–365 n. 288.
- 294 *CDD t*: 264, *trt*.
- 295 Husson 1983: 122–123, fig. 6.
- 296 Husson 1983: 136.
- 297 *P. Oxy.* VIII 1128.14–15 as well as in *P. Brem.* VIII 6–7.
- 298 Husson 1983: 138–141.
- 299 *P. Mich.* XI 620 (Meris of Themistos, Fayyum, 239–240 BC).
- 300 Husson 1983: 32; 209 note 2.
- 301 *P. Oxy.* ILII 3057.12–15 (Oxyrhynchos, 1st–2nd century AD). Tr. by Blumell 2010: 99.
- 302 κέλλα, *SB* I 4755.25 (Fayyum, Byz. Period). Husson 1983: 44.
- 303 Οἴκοι, *SB* V 7816.3 (Oxyrhynchos, AD 166–167); οἰκήματα, *P. Strasb.* II 110.7–8 (Fayyum, 3rd century AD); κέλλαι, *P. Oxy* III 502.54–55 (AD 164); κελλία, *P. Amh.* II 152.16 (Fayyum, 5th century AD); οἰκιδίον, *P. Oxy.* XII 1538.8 (3rd century AD); τόποι, *P. Lond.* II 154.5–7 (Karanis, AD 68). Husson 1983: 45.
- 304 Husson 1983: 44.
- 305 *P. Brem* 15 (Hermopolis, AD 118).
- 306 Cribiore 2001a: 224.
- 307 *P. Brem* 15.7.
- 308 *SB* VI 9462.9–10 (Herakleopolis, AD 657): ‘κοιτωνάριν ἐν ἐν τῷ αἰθρίῳ βλέπον’.
- 309 *P. Oxy* XVI 1957.9–13 (AD 430) = R196. Husson 1983: 32.
- 310 *P. Oxy* XVI 1957.13: ‘ἐν τοῦ ἐθρίου μονόχ[ωρον] σὺν χρηστηρίοις πᾶσι.’ Rowlandson 1998: 262, note 2.
- 311 *P. Oxy.* XVI 1964.11–13 (AD 518): [ν]ευούσης ἐπὶ λεῖβα ὀλόκληρον μονόχωρον τυγχάνον [ὕ]ποκάτω τῆς ἀ[ψ]ῖδος νεῦον ἐπὶ βορρᾶ σὺν χρηστηρίοις καὶ δικαίοις πᾶσι. Tr. by Gonis 2000: 189: ‘a whole single room, which happens (to be situated) under the arch, facing north, with all appurtenances and rights’.
- 312 *BGU* I 305.12–15 (AD 556).
- 313 My translation.
- 314 *P. Strasb.* 314, 12.
- 315 In *P. Petrie* II 12 it is stated that the altars have to occupy the most prominent locations. Altars are also mentioned in magical papyri like PGM 1. 56, 74–75. Husson 1983: 64 note 3.
- 316 Husson 1983: 65 fig. 6.
- 317 *P. Ryl. Gr.* II 233.3 = Sel. Pap. I 123 (Apollonopolites Heptakomias, AD 118).
- 318 *PSI* V 542.11–12 (Arsinoites, 185–165 BC): [. . .] . . . ἐνέκλεισεν [ἡ]μᾶς ἐπὶ τὸ δῶμα.
- 319 *P. Mich* V 253 (Tebtynis, AD 30) = R185.
- 320 Tr. by *APIS*: <http://www.papyri.info/ddbdp/p.mich;5;253>.
- 321 *P. Mich.* V 253.4–5. Tr. by *APIS*. See supra notes 1270–1271.
- 322 The translations below are from Guerneur 2016, also discussed in Töpfer 2014: 330–331.

- 323 *Wb.* IV, 392.12–15; Lesko, *Dictionary* 2 III, 127; Anm. 511 Translation: Nachtlager; Bettlägerigkeit; Beischlaf (=sleeping place; (state of being) bedridden; intercourse). It also means intercourse, so the place for confinement was the same used for intercourse, most probably the bridal bedroom. See also *sdryt*.
- 324 *P. Tebt.* II 422.17–20 (Tebtynis, 3rd century AD).
- 325 Tr. by Grenfell, Hunt, Goodspeed 1907: 299–300.
- 326 *CDD m*: 94.
- 327 *P. Tebt.* III.i 800.27–31.
- 328 Tr. By *APIS*: <http://www.papyri.info/hgv/5383>.
- 329 Cael.Aur., *Gynaecia*, 869ff., ed. Drabkin and Drabkin 1951: 34.
- 330 Sor.2.3. The Hippocratic treatise *Decorum* (15) claimed that the sickbed had to be moved in different rooms of the house according to the kind of illness: ‘Some patients are put in breezy spots, others into covered places or underground. Consider also noises and smells, especially the smell of wine.’ Tr. by Jones 1959, quoted in Baker 2013: 112.
- 331 Toivari-Viitala 2001: 177–178.
- 332 The bedroom in Greco-Roman Egypt was called the *koiton*, while the term *thalamus*, used for married couples’ bedrooms in ancient Greece, indicated the cells of temples in Egypt. However, in the story of Aseneth and Joseph the bedroom is still called *thalamos*, which is curious considering that the story has been dated as late as the Roman Period. In Byzantine documents dating to the 6th–7th century AD the term used for bedroom is ἀκκούβιτον, a term which is certainly a transcription from the Latin *accubitum*. Most of these bedrooms are described as being upstairs. *P. Lond.* V 1723.30 (Syene, AD 577); *P. Lond.* V 1733.19, 71 (Syene, AD 594); *P. P. Münch.* I 8.13 (Syene, AD 540). Husson 1983: 36.
- 333 Hdt. 2.95.1.
- 334 Arnold 2015: 166ff.
- 335 Sor. 2.5 (70a). Tr. by Temkin 1991: 74. My emphasis.
- 336 *P. Lond.* III 1023 (Hermopolis, 5th century AD), 12. An archaeological example of a ground floor bedroom could come from house VIII of Bakchias (fig. 6.3). The house was a multi-storey building, or perhaps a tower-house (Cf. Marouard 2014: 115, fig. 7) as suggested by the flight of stairs; the upper floors are not preserved. It is possible that the private rooms of this house were all upstairs. However, at least three rooms downstairs contained very personal objects, most of which were associated with domestic religious cults of Isis and Harpocrates, and others with female activities. There were also some mats, which could have been used for sitting but also for sleeping. Interestingly, room C was accessible only from another room and it was the only one with a lock. Nifosi 2009: 53–55.

7 Conclusions

This book has investigated the life of women in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt and has shed some light on the social perceptions of coming of age, menstruation and childbirth in the complex society of Greco-Roman Egypt.

This book has provided evidence for two very important aspects of this: firstly, the social perception of reproductive processes like childbirth and menstruation at this time in Egypt was the result of a remarkable synthesis of Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Jewish and Near Eastern cultures (7.1). Secondly, Greeks and Romans introduced into Egypt a new set of cultural and social values, which had a considerable impact on the social and legal status of women and children. Some aspects of these changes, from the Dynastic to the Greco-Roman Period, will be discussed in the second section here (7.2).

7.1 Reproductive processes and a synthesis of cultures in Greco-Roman Egypt

The chapters of this book have shown that Greco-Roman Egyptian society was the result of a combination of ideas and beliefs from the Near East, Dynastic Egypt, Greece and Rome, blended together into a unique culture; a sort of synthesis between Near Eastern, Egyptian and Classical civilisation. Women's reproductive processes offer us a privileged angle to observe aspects of this cultural synthesis.

These contacts between Egyptian and Greek cultures had a visible impact on practices around childbirth: midwifery reached a new level of complexity in Greco-Roman Egypt, where different traditions met and partly influenced each other. Midwives are almost absent from Dynastic Egyptian sources, with only a few rare attestations. However, NK and Late Dynastic attestations of the *rht*, the 'knowledgeable-woman', shows us that these women could be from the upper classes, and were trained by their own families. The sources show that they were called on for matters regarding children and most likely midwifery: indeed, in more than one source Isis claims to be a *rht*, and in particular to be knowledgeable about childbirth.¹ Isis is the highest example of an Egyptian midwife: her role suggests that midwifery, despite its scarce attestations, had an elevated status in Dynastic Egypt.

In Greco-Roman Egypt, some sources mention the existence of the midwife (μαῖα) and the female doctor (ιατρίνα).² Hellenistic and Roman medical treatises give us a good idea about the nature of the medical knowledge of women's anatomy and the practical skills of Greco-Roman midwives. However, private letters from this period are also a fundamental source for the study of midwifery, because they provide us with direct information about birth attendants in ordinary families.³ These letters show that some families did not opt for medically trained midwives, instead choosing a family member or a close friend. Evidence from Roman temples shows that midwifery was also a topic studied by priests who were probably working either as medical practitioners or as ritualists.⁴ Thus Greco-Roman midwifery was practised in different ways and according to several medical traditions. The choice also depended on wealth, culture and level of education of each family.

The survival of traditional Egyptian aspects of midwifery in the Greco-Roman Period shows how birth magic was still considered a fundamental component of medicine. In the Greco-Roman Period, the birth bricks, the traditional support for women in childbirth, also survived to protect the boundaries of the house.⁵

The Near Eastern and Egyptian image of the midwife as a personification of the goddess of fate, who decreed the fate of the child by cutting the umbilical cord, also survived into the Greco-Roman Period.⁶

More evidence for a cultural synthesis in Greco-Roman Egypt is offered by the study of pollution in Chapter 5. Egyptian, Greek and Jewish ideas of pollution, caused by menstruation and childbirth combined, creating a new set of sacred laws and new private rituals of purification. Similar beliefs concerning pollution caused by childbirth can be found in the ancient Near East, Greece and Dynastic Egypt. From the Near Eastern sources, it seems that they believed that pollution was caused by the uncontrollable nature of biological events, and by contact with bodily fluids. Thanks to such sources, we can also say that in both Egypt and the Near East there was the idea that pollution caused by childbirth was very similar to that caused by menstrual blood. Also, Greek culture shows a similar analogy between the pollution of menstruation and the pollution of childbirth. Indeed, Greek sacred laws, which restricted the access of devotees to temples, mentioned menstruation and childbirth together as causes of pollution. Other minor causes of bodily pollution were sexual intercourse and ailments. Beliefs in pollution caused by bodily fluids, and in particular menstrual blood, were also particularly strong in the Jewish community.

In Chapter 5, I also showed that Egyptian, Greek and Jewish culture sanctioned bodily pollutions on two levels: a sacred law for official religion and a private law for family life. Sacred laws were written legal pronouncements exhibited at the entrance of temples, which listed the pollution that limited the access to sacred areas. Domestic laws were unwritten prescriptions, which regulated the purity of the household members within the domestic space. It is impossible to say what private laws prescribed, but the rituals probably involved a regular purification of the body with ablutions and fumigations.

A Jewish law is the only purity law that explicitly mentions private practices of purification, including the total immersion into a domestic stone pool accessed

by a ramp of descending stairs. This pool is attested in Jerusalem but not in Greco-Roman houses in Egypt. Could this lack of evidence suggest that the Jews who lived in Egypt adapted themselves to private Greek purity laws? They may well have done, as the Jewish philosopher Philo describes purification after sexual intercourse as ablutions with a vase.⁷ This practice shows the Jewish use of vases for bodily purification, and we also know that they were used for normal washing, because houses in Greco-Roman Egypt rarely had a private bathroom. An interesting jasper gem represents Baubo washing her genitals with a pot (3.25): due to the association of Baubo with childbirth, the image may represent a purification of the genitals after childbirth. Such a purification certainly existed both in Dynastic and Greco-Roman Egypt, even if it is only attested by two sources: Ruddjedet's purification in the Westcar Papyrus,⁸ and in the Greek sacred law of Ptolemais.⁹

Some sources suggest that menstruating women had to observe a shorter but similar period of confinement, even if it is hard to say how restrictive this was. An attestation of purification during menstruation can be found in three Demotic papyri from Thebes,¹⁰ where women are expected to carry out their ablutions in a particular room identified by scholars as a 'room under the stairs'.¹¹

The room under the stairs has been mentioned many times by scholars as a possible place for confinement during menstruation, but never described into detail. Hence, in section 6.2, I re-examined previous scholarly theories, collected new source material and compared all the written sources with the archaeological evidence. According to the Greek and Demotic papyri dating from the Hellenistic to the Byzantine Period, the room under the stairs seems to have been a typical part of many Egyptian houses from all parts of Egypt, and in a Coptic will it seems to have been used by a woman.¹² However, three Demotic papyri from Thebes are the only sources which associate the room with women's needs.

Other attestations of women carrying out their menstrual requirements include a hieratic ostrakon from Deir el-Medina dating to the NK,¹³ where eight women come out from (or go to) the place of women, where they carry out their menstrual needs. A later source is the Ptolemaic P. *Fouad* inv. 6,¹⁴ where women are said to be menstruating in a building or in a room of a house in front of a temple. We do not know who these women were, so it is difficult to say whether they were using the same room or annex because they belonged to the same family, or because they were part of a religious association living within the temple's precinct.

Neither the hieratic ostrakon nor the Ptolemaic P. *Fouad* inv. 6 give indications about the rooms where women carried out their ablutions, so the room under the stairs is the only room of the house which is explicitly associated with womanly needs. This chapter also tried to reconstruct what women actually did in that space. Papyri from Elephantine offer attestations of this room under the stairs from the 5th century BC to the 6th century AD, showing how long-lasting this tradition was in this area of Egypt.¹⁵ For instance in a 5th century BC Aramaic will, the room under the stairs is described as a *peras*-sized area, possibly indicating a space of very small dimensions.¹⁶

The archaeological evidence for stairs in Greco-Roman Egyptian houses show that the space under them was often just an area for a jar or a niche.¹⁷ However,

other houses had secret rooms hidden within the staircase, accessed from trap doors on the landings. More interestingly, there is a case in Backhias where a small room under the stairs could be accessed from the ground floor through a door. Considering the size of the room, I think that in this and other houses, the room under the stairs was used as a latrine, as happened for example in Roman Imperial-era houses. Both Demotic and Greek sources suggest that the latrine was a space provided with a toilet seat and possibly with a jug of water.¹⁸

It is also clear that in both Dynastic Egyptian and the Greco-Egyptian traditions, the vases used for purification of the body are the same vases used for private hygiene. In addition, one Greek term used for toilet (ἀφεδρών) in the Roman Period is closely related to the term menstruation (ἄφεδρος).¹⁹ Therefore, it is likely that women used this kind of toilet to wash during menstruation. This room was temporarily used by women during these times, but it is likely that it also served as a latrine for the other inhabitants of the house. The more common use of the room under the stairs as a latrine also explains why this room is so often mentioned in Aramaic, Demotic, Greek and Coptic sources, yet its function related to menstruation is only attested in three Demotic papyri. It has also been demonstrated that not all houses had a proper room under the stairs, so the latrine was not always placed there, and could also be found in other external or internal parts of the house.²⁰

The survival of the room under the stairs into the Byzantine period is a striking example of the synthesis of Greek, Roman and Egyptian culture in domestic architecture. Further examples show how Greeks and Romans partly adapted to the native Egyptian architecture: for instance, papyri attest that Greeks who lived in Egypt gave up to the secular tradition of the hearth as the symbolic centre of the house. Moreover, both papyrological and archaeological evidence show that Late Dynastic Egyptian multi-storey houses remained a common feature in Greco-Roman villages and cities.

In relation to women's reproduction, I have shown how the Dynastic pavilion, the most traditional building associated with childbirth,²¹ survived into the Greco-Roman Period both as an actual structure in the private house, and as a symbolic structure in the *mammisi*. As an actual structure, it was built on the roof of the house, in the courtyard or in the garden. Its structure probably varied according to local temperatures and to its position in the house. Sometimes the pavilion was a sort of airy awning built on the roof where the inhabitants could sleep and stay fresh in summer, at other times it was a proper kiosk, provided with a ceiling and walls.²²

The description of the birth of Ruddjedet shows that in the Dynastic Period another alternative for the place of childbirth and confinement was not a temporary pavilion but rather an actual room of the house, whose door could be locked and perhaps even ritually sealed.²³ Domestic rooms seem to have also been used for childbirth and confinement from the Dynastic until the Roman Period. A passage from Soranus²⁴ suggests that sometimes women gave birth in bedrooms located upstairs. Utilising the room upstairs in Egypt was convenient in hot seasons due to the cooler temperature, the absence of flies and the fact that

there was less waste and dust accumulated on the floor. As bedrooms could be in pavilions and kiosks as well as in proper rooms on different floors of the house, I would argue that childbirth and confinement could take place in different areas of the house, according to its size, local temperatures and seasonal changes. These areas were certainly not publicly exposed, so they might have been rooms upstairs in multi-storey houses or rear rooms in houses with one floor. Women could have used rooms on the roof of tower-houses, with the height of these structures agreed among the neighbours, as happens in modern Yemen, to allow more privacy.

No archaeological evidence from the Dynastic to the Greco-Roman Period allows us to say with any certainty whether childbirth and confinement took place in the same room. However, written sources from the Dynastic Period, and the Roman medical writer Soranus, describe a distinction between beds used for childbirth and those for ordinary activities. The 'women's beds' attested in Deir el-Medina in the NK could have been used for childbirth, and then dismantled to be stored. However, beds were expensive items, so it is likely that only wealthy houses used different beds for childbirth and successive confinement; most families could afford to own only one bed and others just slept on mats. The birthing stool seems to have been commonly used as a support, leaving the bed or the mat for resting afterwards.²⁵

The cultural exchange in Greco-Roman Egypt also brought significant changes in popular religion and in the ritual representation of the female body. In particular, the iconography of uterine gems and female figurines shows such a transformation in the Greco-Roman Period. Ancient Egyptian myths were preserved, though they were reinterpreted with Greek names and iconography. For instance, the traditional set of Egyptian birth amulets was enriched by the introduction of Greek uterine gems and spells, which controlled the timely opening of the uterus. The idea that the women's uterus was a sort of wild animal²⁶ which had to be protected, and at the same time tamed, was a Greek idea which can also be found in the Hippocratic treatises. In jasper uterine gems, Greek heroes and Egyptian deities were involved in a cosmic fight in the defence of the woman's uterus. The main protagonists were: a childbearing woman, representing both the Egyptian Isis and the Greek Baubo-Omphale; an ithyphallic ass, representing both the Egyptian Seth and the Greek Typhon-Incubus; and, sometimes, the Greek hero Herakles fighting a lion. Herakles defended the uterus and assured its timely opening, while on the other side of the gem, his lover Omphale was giving birth despite the threats of the ithyphallic ass. This interaction between the uterus and the ithyphallic ass shows a conflict, but also a necessary relationship: the Sethian figures were not completely negative characters because they were able, like Herakles, to tame the uterus.

The representation of naked and childbearing female bodies also offers us a good example of both assimilation and cultural synthesis between Egyptian and Greco-Roman culture. Female votive figurines from Pharaonic Egypt had idealised female bodies, showing a slender waist, marked sexual attributes and sometimes additional attributes, such as necklaces, girdles, elaborate hairstyles, earrings and diadems. Many female figurines are represented with newborn

children, and the inscription on one figurine of woman with child shows that its function was to insure a pregnancy for a woman.²⁷

Greeks still produced female figurines in the Hellenistic Period, but introduced evident changes in materials and style. Pottery was rarely used in the Pharaonic Period and can only be found systematically in the very rare type 2, in type 6 and in some type 3 bed figurines. The most common materials used in the Pharaonic Period were faïence (Types 1A, 2, 3), clay (mainly type 4 and 6 but also often used for the mud-bead hairstyle of types 1B, 2, 4, 5), limestone (1B, 3) but also ivory/bone (1B), wood (1B, 9) and fired pottery (2, 3). From the Late Period, unbaked clay and limestone remained very popular materials for female figurines, while the production of faïence figurines decreased in favour of more Nile silt painted terracottas. The earliest female figurines in the Greek style appeared in the Late Period in the area of Naukratis. However, the Late Dynastic multicultural community of Naukratis introduced some Cypriot-Phoenician themes into votive figurines, which influenced the later Tanagra-style Ptolemaic terracottas: one of these might be the gesture of the Astarte-Anasymene (Figure 3.11).

It is important to remark that Greek-style terracotta figurines inherited many aspects from their Pharaonic predecessors, like the marked sexual attributes and the elaborate hairstyle with earrings. However, the bivalve mould, often used for Greek terracottas, made them far more natural and realistic than Egyptian figurines, that were either unnaturally slender and two-dimensional (type 2), or highly stylised (type 4).

Both Dynastic and Greco-Roman female figurines carried the attributes of fertility deities, but the change in these attributes from the Hellenistic Period shows how Egyptian fertility deities were assimilated with Greek ones in the Greco-Roman era. Up to the NK, images of women were represented with the attributes of Hathor and Bes. Sometimes female figurines wore the *menat* necklace (type 2) had tattoos (types 1A, 1B) and the crossed chest bands of Hathoric dancers (1A, 1B, 4). Two Bes-masked female figurines from the MK and a similar amulet from the Late Period (Figures 3.28–29) also suggest that female mummers might have worn Bes masks for some kind of fertility ritual, perhaps involving dance; music and dance played a key role in fertility rituals for Hathor and Bes. In Greco-Roman Egypt, Hathor was associated with Aphrodite by the Greeks. However, the goddess was also assimilated with Isis, who was interpreted as Demeter, and with Bastet, who was interpreted as Artemis. Therefore, female terracotta figurines from the Hellenistic Period showed attributes from all these Egyptian and Greek goddesses.

The introduction into Egypt of the Greek cults of Demeter, Aphrodite and Artemis were also fundamental for the development of a new type of female figurine: the childbearing woman. However, pregnant and childbearing figurines were not completely absent from Dynastic Egypt as can be seen with types 7 and 8: they were simply less represented and always very roughly made. For some reason, possibly related to the nature of Greek cults, the Greeks who settled in Egypt decided that pregnant and childbearing figurines deserved a better medium than pebbles, ostraca and hand-modelled unbaked clay, and so often represented them using painted terracottas with the attributes of Greco-Egyptian deities.

The widespread representation of childbearing women in the context of domestic cults shows a clear concern for this particular phase, and also perhaps an attempt to control with magic and spells the otherwise unpredictable outcomes of childbirth. In the Hellenistic Period, terracottas of plump women with open legs were given the attributes of Demeter, showing a possible initial association with the Isis-Demeter mysteries taking place in the Eleusis district of Alexandria. The association of childbearing figurines with Demeter was also the origin of their scholarly name 'Baubo'. In this book, I have presented all the figurines of childbearing women which have been defined as 'Baubo' (Figures 3.18–21).²⁸ Baubo is associated with Anasyrmene (Figure 3.12), with whom she shares attributes, which ultimately derive from Isis-Hathor and Aphrodite. However, Baubo is also associated with Bes, with whom she shares a dwarfish appearance. Baubo herself is sometimes represented as Besit, the counterpart of Bes, and wears his crown with feathers (Figures 3.16–17). Baubo and Bes also express that association between goddess and ithyphallic figure, which becomes particularly visible in Roman uterine gems (Figure 3.22).

Dynastic and Greco-Roman female figurines were stylistically different but had a common trait: even though they carried the attributes of fertility deities, they did not represent any specific deity themselves. A possible reason for this was because they had only a temporary ritual purpose, and then were discarded. Figurines might also have had only a generic identity because their bodies were seen as mere canvases for the representation of sexual attributes. Indeed, finely made figurines created at the same time as rougher versions consisting of almost faceless and legless bodies that were only provided with breasts, navels and genitals (Figures 3.8–3.10).²⁹

However, some Greek-style terracottas' faces were given the same importance as the rest of the body, and sometimes even expressed emotions through a smile (Figure 3.17). In addition, female figurine of this style not only had religious attributes but were also represented performing ritual gestures, such as the act of the Anasyrmene (Figure 3.12). However, despite these facial expressions and ritual gestures, it is difficult to determine whether they represent just a generic figurine or a more defined subject like a goddess, a priestess or a worshipper. While it is difficult to discuss the identity of figurines with religious attributes, I think a generic identity can be given to a very common group of Baubo terracottas without attributes and with open legs, represented only until the knees (Figure 3.21); these Baubos are legless like most Dynastic female figurines. A specific study of Baubos is needed in order to discover their possible identity and use, however.

7.2 Changes in the social status of women and children from the Dynastic to the Greco-Roman Period

This book has shown how the Greeks and the Romans brought a new set of social and cultural values to Egypt that gradually impacted on the social status of women and children.

A change in social and cultural values can be seen in legal pronouncements: from the Late Dynastic until the Roman Period, women had increasingly less freedom to act for themselves and for others. Indeed, the Greeks and Romans introduced through the legal system the idea that women had to act through a guardian, and that they could not decide on the destiny of their offspring independently. Demotic contracts, preserved on papyri and ostraca, show that, up until the 1st century AD, women who decided to follow Egyptian law had the right to act without a guardian and to be guardians of their own children. By the end of the 1st century AD the Egyptian legal system seems to have disappeared, a time when the new Roman administration discouraged the use of Demotic for any kind of official contract. Nevertheless, by the time such contracts disappeared, Egyptian law had already influenced its Greek counterpart. By the Roman Period, social mobility and intermarriage were discouraged and society became rigidly divided into separate groups, consisting of: Roman citizens, Greek citizens, *metropolitai* and the gymnasial class. Access to these from outside became increasingly restricted, excluding a large part of the population.³⁰

This book has also shed light on the social perception of the process of women's coming of age, the phase in which women reached marriageable age and the peak of their social visibility. Since the Dynastic Period, women who were ready for marriage were considered the most beautiful and desirable. Dynastic sources mention women as desirable because their body 'had never been opened by childbirth',³¹ but they never say whether a woman's marriageability was compromised by their loss of virginity out of wedlock. Indeed, the word virginity is not yet attested in our sources. The absence of virgin-goddesses from the Egyptian pantheon is also striking, while Greek virgin-goddesses, and in particular Artemis, had an important role in the life of Greek women.³²

In Egypt, virginity before marriage was not an idealised social state as in Greece, but this does not mean there was no social concern for the chastity of unmarried girls, nor does it mean there was complete freedom for Egyptian girls to choose their husbands without their family's approval. Indeed, Demotic marriage contracts showed that although women were not given in marriage by their parents, they still needed their economic support. In fact, if girls were able to bring a substantial dowry into the marriage, they received more favourable conditions in the marriage contract.³³ In addition, even if it is not clear whether there was a concern for chastity before marriage, there is evidence for worries about women's faithfulness during marriage. Women who wanted to recover their dowry after a divorce had to take an oath in a temple, swearing to the gods that they had always been faithful to their husband.³⁴

In Greek and Roman societies, it is evident that fathers felt responsible for the preservation of their daughter's chastity until their marriage, and women were not allowed to marry without their father's approval. Fathers' protection of unmarried daughters is attested in Egypt only from the Greco-Roman Period. For instance, in Chapter 6, I showed that unmarried women may have received their own separate spaces while they lived in their father's house before their marriage. The most emblematic case is the story of the Egyptian girl Aseneth,³⁵ who lived in the upper

floor of a tower, in a rich rural complex. Some details of the story are clearly exaggerated, and perhaps part of it was influenced by a fictional literary tradition, but the practice of keeping maidens in protected areas of the house is not so unlikely, as some papyri mention the existence of a room for unmarried women.³⁶

These rooms for unmarried women are the only hint of a temporary gender division of domestic space. Indeed, I showed that the subdivision of domestic spaces in Greco-Roman Egyptian houses was not gender-specific, but rather between public and more private areas instead. The bigger the house was, the more private space women had for themselves.³⁷

The preservation of an unmarried woman's chastity was particularly important during the time between betrothal and marriage. In Roman Egypt, the Roman tradition of betrothal seems to have combined with the Greco-Egyptian tradition of consecrating young brides-to-be to the goddess Isis. A possible celebration of this consecration to Isis is attested in three Late Roman papyri from Oxyrhynchos.³⁸

Funerary practices also attest to a change of values in Greco-Roman Egypt, with more evident manifestations of grief for women who either died in childbirth or before reaching the coming of age.³⁹ The painting on a grave stela of a woman who died in childbirth shows the tragic, and at the same time 'heroic', moment in which the woman faints in the arms of the midwife. A group of epitaphs of girls that died before puberty shows the pain of the parents who are left without their daughters and the joy of having grandchildren. The objects in the tombs of these girls are associated with domestic activities and feminine beauty, but also contain images of childbearing women (Figure 3.20). It is possible that these images were magically compensating these girls with the representation of an event that they would never reach.

This change in social values, which started in Hellenistic Egypt and became more visible in the Roman Period, also had a clear impact on practices around childbirth and on the status of unborn and newborn children. The private labour of Ruddjedet, typical of an ordinary labour in the Dynastic Period, seems very distant from the publicly witnessed labour of the Roman citizen Petronilla: such a cultural gap makes it hard to believe that these stories both came from Egypt.

The Dynastic birthing room was ideally set up as an inviolable shrine, where labour was completely in the hands of the midwife, and where the rest of the world remained locked out, including the father of the child. In Greco-Roman Egypt, male doctors and fathers gradually stepped into this space; the midwives' traditional knowledge was partially appropriated by male doctors, who wrote popular treatises on midwifery and often flanked their female colleagues in the birthing room, although mainly in cases of emergency.

The traditional identification of midwives with the Fates tallied well with Roman values. In the Roman Period, midwives were represented as the Fates in the act of recognising the child by picking it up from the ground, so performing the functions of the *pater familias*.

The social recognition of children is never mentioned in Dynastic Egypt because it was probably taken for granted. On the contrary, Greek and Hellenised families in Greco-Roman Egypt adopted the practice of child exposure. The father

was the only one who could decide whether to keep the child, and his reasons for abandoning it could be numerous. For example, children could be considered too weak to survive; the family may have not been able to afford to maintain another child; or the father of the children was dead, and the wife needed to expose her child to be able to remarry.

In order to explain the social condition of unborn and newborn children in Greco-Roman Egypt, I discussed many popular and philosophical ideas concerning the foetus and the newborn child (see Chapter 4). Philosophers and medical writers largely had two very contrasting positions about the ensoulment of the unborn child.⁴⁰ One group, which included Plato, Neo-Platonic philosophers, and later some Christian writers, claimed that the embryo was a human being since its conception. On the contrary, the Stoics thought that the embryo was a plant-like soulless creature, which only acquired a soul when it was born. Between these two opposing positions, there was a third, probably brought to Egypt by Hippocratic doctors, called the 'gradualist theory'. This claimed that the foetus gradually developed in the womb, acquiring a human appearance and rational soul only after the first forty days. The gradualist theory must have been the most popular in Greco-Roman Egypt because it was the model that most closely resembled native Egyptian medical and religious ideas about the unborn child. A successful synthesis between Dynastic and Hippocratic gradualism could also be the reason why uterine gems expressed the idea that the fully formed child was able to start its own birth, like a chick ready to hatch out of its egg.⁴¹

It is never explicitly stated how long it took for the father to recognise a newborn. A papyrus from the Roman Fayyum⁴² talks about a feast of forty days to celebrate the child, while Censorinus⁴³ mentions a feast to celebrate the end of the postpartum period. It is difficult to tell how long this liminality lasted for, and whether parents cared less about a child if it died before being recognised.

A helpful source to help us understand the status of unborn and newborn children comes from the burials of children younger than one year.⁴⁴ My brief survey of case studies from the Dynastic to the Roman Period showed that many children younger than a year often received burials separate from those of adults. This suggests that children under one year were only partially recognised by their parents. However, even a partial social recognition does not mean that their families did not care for them, or that they neglected to provide them with objects for the afterlife; even guardian-animals may be present with some examples.⁴⁵

Interestingly, Egyptian, Greek and Roman law seemed to have different positions on the status of unborn and newborn children.⁴⁶ Demotic marriage contracts show that the children of the couple, even those that were not yet born, had the right to inherit the property of the father. Yet, Greek marriage contracts showed that pregnant women and women with newborn children could be in serious trouble if the husband died or divorced them before recognising the child. Unrecognised children in this situation lost the right to inherit their father's property, and had to be maintained by their mother. Roman marriage contracts gave a child conceived within the marriage the right to inherit its father's property and name, even if the father himself died or divorced its mother. However, if a woman lost her husband

while still pregnant, she had to be constantly visited by a midwife, in order to assure the family of the husband that the pregnancy was continuing and that she was not cheating them to get her husband's property.

In Greco-Roman Egyptian society, like never before in Egypt, fathers and husbands had the last word for their unmarried daughters, the legitimacy of their wives' pregnancy and the recognition of their children. As a result, as the papyri show, many abandoned or widowed mothers, as well as unrecognised or orphaned children, faced poverty and social exclusion.

Conversely, other sources from the Hellenistic and Roman Period attest to how much some fathers cared about their women and children. Heart-breaking epitaphs dedicated by husbands to their wives indicate this, as well as the existence of the feast of the fortieth day, which celebrated the end of postpartum dangers and welcomed mother and child into society.

7.3 Scope for future research

The novel interdisciplinary approach used in this book has brought to light new areas for potential future research.

In Chapter 1, I combined the study of papyri, literature and epigraphic material, in order to discuss a possible coming of age ritual in Greco-Roman Egypt. This topic would certainly benefit from further research that focuses on the relationship between Isis and unmarried women.

Chapter 3 presented different aspects of domestic religion related to childbirth that would also benefit from further study. In particular, a systematic work that collects all spells for the protection of domestic spaces in Egypt from the Dynastic to the Greco-Roman Period would be an important step forward. This work should also ideally include a study of the physical apotropaic objects used in the domestic context.

Chapter 3 also laid out the patterns of typological continuity between Dynastic and Greco-Roman female figurines. My classification of Dynastic types brought together the most recent studies, and examined many unpublished examples from museums. However, the analysis of Baubo and Anasyrmene types would benefit from a more in-depth study and classification, which would clarify their function as well as making plain potential further elements of comparison with earlier Dynastic figurines.

Chapter 4 began a debate about the liminal legal and existential status of the unborn and newborn child in Greco-Roman Egypt. In order to fully explore this topic, a further study of the medical and philosophical discussion would certainly be needed. A systematic comparative analysis of Demotic and Greek legal documents which mention or allude to the rights of unborn and newborn children would also be useful.

Chapter 6 presented a series of new methods and new questions that could be addressed in the future. Firstly, a broader analysis of modern architecture in Egypt could be used by scholars to help elucidate the Greco-Roman and Byzantine archaeological evidence. This could be done not only for domestic contexts but

also in the study of non-residential buildings, such as granaries, public baths and guarding towers. An archaeological and papyrological study of domestic contexts would also provide a welcome update to the work of Nowicka and Husson. Such a study for Greco-Roman Egypt would also allow help scholars answer the social and cultural questions raised by the papyri. For example, archaeology can at times show how domestic spaces were divided when sections of the same house were rented to many people, as attested in several rent contracts. At the same time, there are also research questions where the limits of the archaeological evidence would benefit from a study of the unpublished papyri: for instance, the publication of untranslated papyri could provide new evidence for the function of upper floors in multi-storey houses.

Notes

- 1 P. *Westcar* 10.5.
- 2 See 2.2.1.
- 3 See 2.2.2.
- 4 See 2.2.3.
- 5 See 2.2.2.
- 6 See 2.2.2.
- 7 See 5.1.
- 8 P. *Westcar* 11.18–19.
- 9 See 5.3.
- 10 P. *Louvre* 2424.2; 2431.4; 2443.4. See 6.3.1.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., about a Coptic will from the village of Jeme.
- 13 OIM 13512. See 5.2.
- 14 See 6.3.1.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 See 6.3.1.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 For instance, the τόπος mentioned in P. *Fouad* inv. 6 faced the temple, so it could not have been a room under the stairs.
- 21 See 6.4.2.
- 22 See 6.3.2.1–2.
- 23 See 2.1.
- 24 Sor. 2.5 (70a).
- 25 See 2.2.2.
- 26 See 3.2.2.4.
- 27 Type 1B. Berlin Ägyptisches Museum 14517.
- 28 See 3.2.2.3.
- 29 See in particular type 7.
- 30 However, the situation changed again in the late Roman Period, when the Edict of Caracalla guaranteed Roman citizenship to all the free men and women of Egypt.
- 31 P. *Westcar* 5.11. See 1.2.1.
- 32 See 1.2.2.
- 33 See 4.2.
- 34 See 1.5.
- 35 See 6.2.

36 Ibid.

37 This was the case, for example, of Aline, the wife of the strategos Apollonios, in Hermopolis, who had her own bedroom: *ibid.*

38 P. *Oxy.* LXVI 4542 (Oxyrhynchos, 3rd century AD); P. *Oxy* LXVI 4543 (Oxyrhynchos, AD 276–300); P. *Oxy.Hels.* 50 (3rd century D). See 1.2.4.3.

39 See 1.1, 2.2 and 3.2.2.5. All the epitaphs and tombs that I discussed are dated to the 2nd century AD and come from Hawara and Tuna el-Gebel.

40 See 4.2.

41 See 4.3.

42 See 5.3.

43 Ibid.

44 See 4.4.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

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